

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

Soldier's Heart

by Gary Paulsen

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Soldier's Heart

Foreword

1. The first line of the Forward is: "War is always, in all ways, appalling." Most of us have an image of war in our minds that comes from real-life experience, from what we have read about in books, or from scenes of war we have seen in the media. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, the United States was involved in the Vietnam conflict. The images of war that come to mind for people who lived during the Vietnam era include: helicopters flying over jungle-like terrain, longhaired protesters and a young Vietnamese girl fleeing naked down a road because her clothes were burned away.

Think about the images the word "war" stimulates in your mind. In one or two paragraphs, describe these images.

2. The Forward reminds the reader that soldiers are not only harmed by the physical dangers of war, but also by the devastating emotional and mental stresses that war brings. In the First World War, this disorder was called "shell shock." In the Second World War, it was called "battle fatigue." Today, the disorder is called "post-traumatic stress disorder."

This story takes place during the Civil War. Soldiers who were mentally damaged in this war were said to have "soldier's heart."

Think about all of these terms. Which term do you think is most descriptive of the disorder? Write a letter to the United States War Department suggesting that the department adopt the term you prefer as the official term to describe this disorder. Give your reasons for preferring this term over the others.

Response Journal

3. The following passage describes the impact of the horrors of war on Civil War soldiers:

In the Civil War the syndrome [post-traumatic stress] was generally not recognized at all. While the same horrors existed as those in modern war, in some ways they were even worse because the technological aspect of war being born then, the wholesale killing by men using raw firepower, was so new and misunderstood.

This paragraph suggests that young people today are less susceptible to post-traumatic stress than young people during the Civil War because young people today are accustomed to the idea of the “wholesale killing by men.”

Write a letter to Gary Paulsen discussing with him the extent to which you agree with this assumption.

Soldier's Heart

Chapter One
June 1861

4. Even though he is only fifteen years old, Charley decides he wants to join the army. Write a dialogue between Charley and his best friend discussing Charley's reasons for wanting to join the Union army. The dialogue might begin as follows:

Charley: Did you hear? The Rebels fired on Fort Sumter.

Friend: Yep. There is going to be trouble about that.

Charley: Those rebels – the only thing they respect...

5. Even though he is only fifteen, Charley plans to “sign to fight as a man.” Write a “to do” list that Charley might follow to implement his plan. The list might begin as follows:

CHARLEY'S TO DO LIST

1. Take a walk to Fort Snelling.
- 2.

6. The following excerpt describes how Charley appears to his mother as he tells her about his desire to join the Minnesota Volunteers:

She hated it when he talked fast. He always got his way when he talked fast. He'd smile and that cowlick would stand up in the back and he'd talk fast and she couldn't keep him from what he wanted.

How do you suppose you appear to the adults in your life when you are trying to get something you want? Write a description of yourself, similar to the description of Charley, trying to persuade an adult to let you have your way.

Response Journal

7. In the following excerpt, Charley is talking to his mother about joining the fight. As part of the discussion, he relates his ideas of manhood and the behaviors he believes are required for a boy to become a “man.”

And I've got to be a man sometime. You've said it more than once yourself. Charley, you said, you've got to be a man. Well, here it is – my chance to be a man. A boy wouldn't go off to earn eleven dollars a month and wear a uniform. Only a man. So I'm going to be a man and do what a man can do.

What do you think of Charley's definition of manhood? In one or two paragraphs, write your own list of the qualities or behaviors you believe a young boy must acquire to be a man.

8. Charley's mother tries to talk Charley out of joining the Minnesota Volunteers, but in the end, she lets him go. As Charley's mother, write a diary entry explaining why you let your underage son go to war.

Chapter Two

Fort Snelling

9. As Charley, write a letter to your younger brother Orren, comically describing the pitiful uniform you are issued at Fort Snelling.
10. The colonel reads Charley and the other recruits a list of things that as soldiers, they are not supposed to do. As a soldier, Charley should not “desert his post, traffic with the enemy, steal from his fellow soldiers, act immoral or without decency.”

Charley knows how to read, but he has limited life experience. He has only seen one town, Winona, and has never traveled more than five miles from that town. Assume that Charley does not understand the list of things he should not do. Write a dialogue between Charley and the colonel of the regiment. In the dialogue, the colonel should explain each item on the list to Charley.

The dialogue might begin as follows:

Charley: Excuse me, sir, but I do not understand. What does it mean to desert my post?

Colonel: That means you don't run away.

Charley: I'm no coward. I would never do that. What does...

11. Suppose you are a reporter working for a major Minnesota newspaper. Write a story, based on Charley's observations, about the living conditions and the training of the Minnesota Volunteers. The story might begin as follows:

The new Minnesota volunteers arrived at Fort Snelling today to begin training. Each soldier was issued a uniform consisting of ...