The footsoldier was the backbone of the Roman legion, and it was through his dedication and courage that Rome built her empire. Thanks to contemporary documents, including the works of Roman historians, letters, grave markers, and relief carvings, we can say much about the life of the Roman soldier in the time of Augustus.

The soldier's career began on recruitment day. Roman legions were almost always made up of volunteers, not conscripted (drafted) soldiers. During times of emergency, the emperor could "draft" men into the army, but this was very rare. Generally, only Roman citizens could join the legions, Provincials (people in the provinces) who wished to serve in the Roman army entered the auxiliary units (see sidebar, page 40).

The Roman soldier spent much of his adulthood in the legion. In the time of Augustus, volunteers agreed to sixteen years of service, plus four years as a "veteran" in crack (first-rate) units. The life of a veteran was easier than that of the standard recruit, since veterans were exempted from most camp duties and drills. On occasion, however, veterans were forced to serve more than the required four years. This happened because Rome was almost always at war, and veterans were needed for their expert fighting skills. Yet, there was often a second reason for extending a veteran's term of service, and it was indeed a far more compelling one. Usually, veterans were promised bonuses when they were discharged, but sometimes the government found it impossible to keep this promise. Such situations occurred more and more frequently under Augustus' successors, and a common solution was to decree that a veteran's term of duty be lengthened to ten or twenty years. Angered and frustrated by the unfairness of the decree, veterans often mutinied.

While serving, Roman soldiers were paid what was called a stipendium, the amount of which depended on seniority and rank. In the time of Augustus, the stipendium amounted to a base pay of about 225 denarii per year. Centurions, the non-commissioned or enlisted officers of
the legions, made up to fifteen thousand denarii per year. Commissioned officers in the army were paid according to their position and responsibilities. These men were usually aristocrats and interested in using their military careers as a springboard into politics. As a result, their concerns regarding pay were different from the common soldier's.

We have several letters written by soldiers to their families, asking for gifts of money. Indeed, surviving documents from the period seem to indicate that many footsoldiers considered their pay insufficient, and even mutinied on occasion to show their dissatisfaction. Usually, the government supplied housing and equipment, while all other expenses had to come from a soldier's modest salary. During wartime, however, soldiers could expect a share in the booty taken from enemy cities.

Yet, the life of the Roman soldier was not dominated by warfare, but by the routine of the camp. Legionaries went on marches, drilled in formation, and practiced using their weapons, much as today's soldiers do. In addition, they spent a considerable amount of time caring for their weapons and armor. The most monotonous tasks involved running the camp, that is, chores such as guard duty, maintaining latrines, and foraging for food. In their limited free time, the soldiers talked and joked with friends, sang songs, gambled (officially this was discouraged), or wrote letters to their families. During peace-time, provincial governors had the legionaries build bridges, aqueducts, and roads, but the majority of the Roman soldier's time was spent doing the kind of everyday chores, such as cleaning the barracks and KP ("kitchen police") duty, that are still unpopular with soldiers today.

As in most armies, Roman soldiers could expect "decorations" for superior service. In the time of Augustus, the footsoldier could receive a pair of gold torques (neck rings), or an armilla (bracelet), which he would wear during full-dress parades. Other honors included the phalera (badge) and the corona (roughly the equivalent of our "Medal of Honor"), which was given to a soldier who saved a comrade's life. Officers could win the hasta pura ("Silver Spearhead") and the vexillum ("Silver Standard"). These decorations had little monetary value and conferred few privileges on the bearer. Rather, they were meant to recognize service and boost morale.

For soldiers who did not perform their duties, the reward was harsh punishment. It was the responsibility of the centurions to maintain discipline, and they did so expertly. Minor offenses might result in disagreeable duty, such as being assigned to the night watch. More serious crimes could result in whipping, a decrease in rank, or even a dishonorable discharge. Acts of cowardice, such as desertion, could result in death. Sometimes, an entire unit was punished for disobeying orders. The most feared penalty was the decimatio, when every tenth soldier in a unit was stoned to death. Such harsh punishment sometimes resulted in discontent among the soldiers, but usually it served to maintain the strict discipline that was a characteristic trait of the Roman legion. Indeed, it was the discipline of the Roman warrior that made him the best in the world.

A soldier's career, if it did not end in death on the battlefield came to a close after he completed his term of service -under Augustus the term was set first at sixteen years and then
extended to twenty years. At that time, he was issued a discharge and a diploma as proof of his service. Veteran units often received a promised bonus or a gift of land. Sometimes veterans were settled in colonies with other veterans. One purpose of these colonies was to "Romanize" foreign provinces. The payment of veteran's benefits, however, often proved to be a controversial issue. This, too, reminds us of contemporary times and our own treatment of veterans. Thus it would seem that the Roman legionary was truly the world's first "modern" soldier!

PHOTO (COLOR): Uncovered in England, this military armilia ("bracelet") was fashioned of solid gold.

PHOTO (COLOR): Clearly shown in this drawing of a relief depicting a Roman legionary are two torques -- twisted neck rings awarded for bravery in battle. By customs a Roman soldier wore them on his breastplate.

PHOTOS (COLOR): Once the proud possessions of a Roman centurion, these swords and breastplate now help us understand how a Roman protected himself in battle. Adorning the breastplate are a set of nine phalerae ("badges"), awarded for heroic action in battle.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Roman soldiers advance against a German stronghold with their shields above their heads and interlocked, in the so-called "testudo formation." (a relief from the triumphal column honoring the emperor Marcus Aurelius, A.D 161-180)

PHOTO (COLOR): Using historical records and uncovered artifacts as guides, members of the Ermine Street Guard outfit themselves as officers of the Roman Legio XX ("Twentieth Legion").

PHOTO (COLOR): Flag standard-bearer

PHOTO (COLOR): Horn player

by Joseph J. Basile

Joseph J. Basile is a professor of Art History at the Maryland Institute, College of Art in Baltimore, Maryland, and associate director of the Brown University excavations at The 'Great' Temple in Petra, Jordan. He has a Ph.D. from the Center for Old World Archaeology and Art at Brown, and has written previously for CALLIOPE.