

Turning soldiers into victims in the North and South

Union army Surgeon general, George Worthington Adams famously said, "The Civil War was fought at the end of the medical Middle Ages"¹. The Civil War resulted with thousands of deaths. However, most of the casualties were because of the terrible conditions in camps and careless doctors who didn't have the adequate amount of training. There were not many medical advancements at the time and people were not required to have official medical certification to perform any type of medical assistance. As a result, the attempted saving by the doctors was messy and dangerous for the patients. The amateur doctors in the contaminated camps created victims out of the soldiers. The doctors were the true enemy of the Civil War by infecting the soldiers and spreading terrible diseases. The congested and filthy medical camps during the war were the result of the careless doctors, which became a serious problem. Nurses struggled to keep each patient away from contamination from terrible diseases. The camps were crowded, uncomfortable, and torture for the soldiers trying to recover. Most

¹"Civil War Medical Care, Battle Wounds, and Disease." Civil War Medical Care, Battle Wounds, and Disease. Accessed 2015. <http://www.civilwarhome.com/civilwarmedicine.html>.

lives during the war were lost because the lack of organization in the medical camps.

The Civil War was fought by the same people with different beliefs. Each side, the Union and Confederate, both had advantages and disadvantages in regard to medical treatment.

Civil war doctors did not have the same preparation as the ones do today. There were “over 60 medical schools existing before the war”². However, the schools taught the primary skills and terminology and only basic medical science information. Most of what they learned was just common knowledge, which allowed the doctor to make each patient a new experiment each time. On top of lack of knowledge, the doctors also did not have many resources to perform safe surgeries. As a result, patients would not properly heal all the way or they would be exposed to an infection or disease. These patients would characterize their doctors as “butchers”³. Since many soldiers in the camps needed medical attention, the doctors had to perform fast in order to get to other patients who needed immediate medical attention. Since time was limited to help each patient, the doctors did not care about perfection. This led to many infections and problems in the medical camps. The doctors did not expect the war to last so long and, therefore, they felt greatly unprepared.

² "Civil War Medical Care, Battle Wounds, and Disease." Civil War Medical Care, Battle Wounds, and Disease. Accessed 2015. <http://www.civilwarhome.com/civilwarmedicine.html>.

³ "Civil War Medical Care, Battle Wounds, and Disease." Civil War Medical Care, Battle Wounds, and Disease. Accessed 2015. <http://www.civilwarhome.com/civilwarmedicine.html>.

New bullets were developed during the Civil War. They were called the “minie ball”. These bullets were shaped like an arrow and damaged a body much more effectively than a standard bullet at the time. The bullet also “carried dirt and germ into the wound”⁴ which, as a result, caused terrible infections. Additionally, the minie balls also damaged the limb it was shot into. When a minie ball would go into a limb there was no chance of having that limb survive. Most of the amputations in the war were due to the cause of the “severe nature of wounds”⁵ produced by the destructive minie ball. As shown in Figure 1 below, the wound on the left is caused by a standard bullet, and the wound on the right was caused by a minie ball.

⁴ "Civil War Medical Care, Battle Wounds, and Disease." Civil War Medical Care, Battle Wounds, and Disease. Accessed 2015. <http://www.civilwarhome.com/civilwarmedicine.html>.

⁵ "Civil War Museum Exhibits." National Museum of Civil War Medicine. Accessed 2015. <http://www.civilwarmed.org/national-museum-of-civil-war-medicine/exhibits/>.

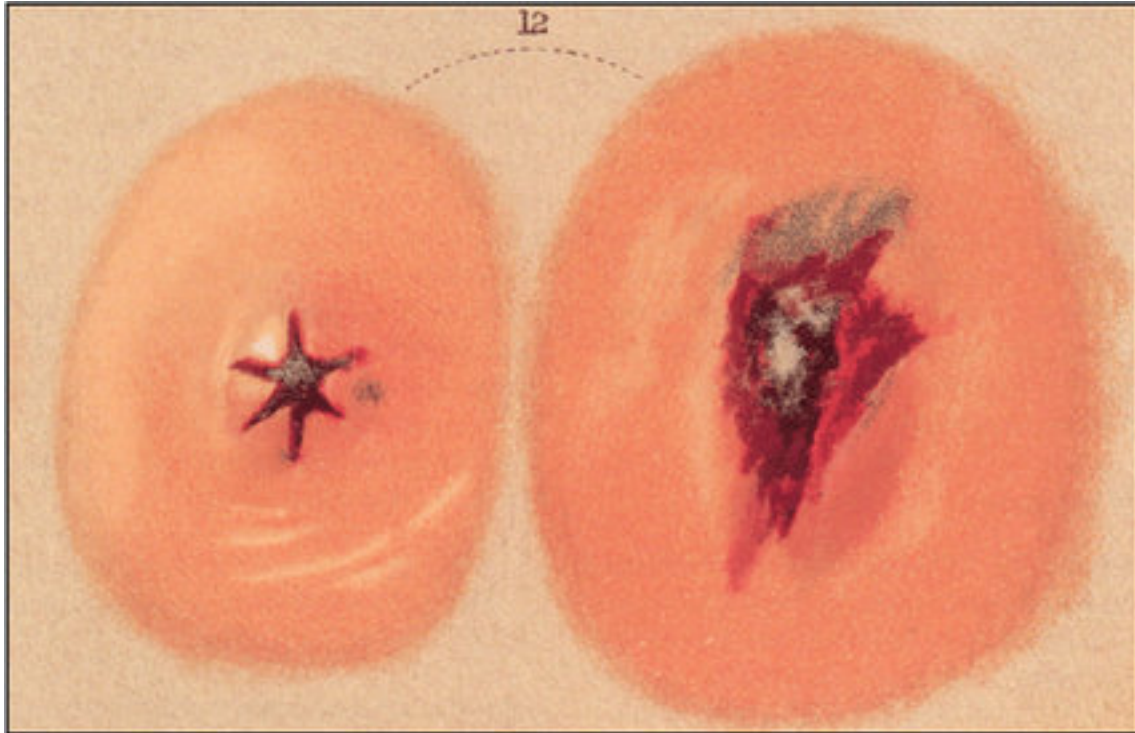


Figure 1

During the war, many amputations took place as a result to the fact that the doctors in the medicine profession were not very knowledgeable. “In many cases the amputation would be performed in ten minutes”⁶ because of the limited time and the sufficient amount of need. In some camps, amputated limbs would be stacked “up to five feet high”⁷. As a result of the limited time the doctors did not have time to use anesthesia and took advantage of the “surgical shock of battle”⁸ and waited till the heart

⁶ "Civil War Medicine." Civil War Medicine. Accessed 2015.
<http://www.sonofthesouth.net/leefoundation/civil-war-medicine.htm>.

⁷ "Civil War Medicine." Civil War Medicine. Accessed 2015.
<http://www.sonofthesouth.net/leefoundation/civil-war-medicine.htm>.

⁸ "Medicine in the Civil War." Accessed 2015. <http://www.utoledo.edu/library/canaday/exhibits/quackery/quack8.html>.

rate of the patient was ideal. As the doctors became more experienced throughout the war they came up with other ways to effectively treat and heal their patients. A new method of amputating was called excision and resection. This is where the doctor would remove the injured part of the limb "leaving a shortened, less functional limb"⁹. Thereby making the process simple and instead of cutting off a whole arm the patient could have only lost his forearm. In order to calm down their patients, doctors would give them whiskey. However, doctors realized it wasn't very effective as their surgeries became more and more advanced. As a result a new technique was using chloroform to calm the patient. This chemical was "nonflammable and worked in about nine minutes"¹⁰. However, if the doctor was not careful, incorrect usage would result in death. Although it took more medical skills to use chloroform it "greatly reduced the torture and trauma"¹¹ for the patient. Also since it was nonflammable it could be used right on the battlefield for immediate attention. However, the camps away from the battles, wrestled with the problem of infection and disease.

The hospital camps for the soldiers wounded had a serious problem with sanitation due to the quick process of amputation and carelessness of hygiene. "Luck

⁹ "Pennsylvania Civil War 150." Instruments & Techniques. Accessed 2015.
<http://pacivilwar150.com/ThenNow/Medicine/InstrumentsTechniques>.

¹⁰ "Civil War Era Medicine." Community and Conflict Civil War Era Medicine Comments. Accessed 2015.
<http://www.ozarkscivilwar.org/themes/medicine>.

¹¹ "Civil War Medicine." Civil War Medicine. Accessed 2015.
<http://www.sonofthesouth.net/leefoundation/civil-war-medicine.htm>.

was a rarity in the camps”¹², many soldiers died not because of their wounds but the true enemy to the war, the infections and poor conditions of the camps. There was little access to water so doctors and assistants “went days without washing their hands or instruments”¹³, which made it easy for wounded soldiers to get infections. Patients, rather known as victims, of the terrible amputations would get terrible infections, “commonly known as surgical fevers”¹⁴. However, in the south, Richmond, Virginia had the most successful camp. It was called Chimborazo and was “a model of efficiency”¹⁵. Other than Chimborazo, sanitation in the camps and hospitals were “less ideal and led to debilitating outbreaks”¹⁶. Figure 2 is an example of what the camps looked like. There was a letter from a surgeon in Missouri that read, “I can see no end to this infernal war...Springfield presents rather a gloomy appearance every house nearly has been converted to a hospital”¹⁷. The surgeon sent the letter to the Missouri State Guard explaining that the situation is so bad people are giving up space in their own

¹² "Civil War Medicine." Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed 2015.

<http://www.civilwar.org/education/history/civil-war-medicine/civil-war-medicine.html>.

¹³ "Civil War Medical Care, Battle Wounds, and Disease." Civil War Medical Care, Battle Wounds, and Disease. Accessed 2015. <http://www.civilwarhome.com/civilwarmedicine.html>.

¹⁴ "Civil War Medical Care, Battle Wounds, and Disease." Civil War Medical Care, Battle Wounds, and Disease. Accessed 2015. <http://www.civilwarhome.com/civilwarmedicine.html>.

¹⁵ "North-South Medicine Compared – George Wunderlich." Civil War Scholars The Powerful Experience of the War Torn Northern Shenandoah Valley. Accessed 2015. <http://civilwarscholars.com/2011/10/north-south-medicine-compared-george-wunderlich/>.

¹⁶ "Confederate Medical Department, Civil Practice to Civil War: The Medical College of the State of South Carolina 1861-1865." Confederate Medical Department, Civil Practice to Civil War: The Medical College of the State of South Carolina 1861-1865. Accessed 2015. <http://waring.library.musc.edu/exhibits/civilwar/Department.php>.

¹⁷ "Civil War Era Medicine." Community and Conflict Civil War Era Medicine Comments. Accessed 2015. <http://www.ozarkscivilwar.org/themes/medicine>.

household. This letter regarding the terrible conditions and many other complaints led to the U.S. Sanitary Commission. It was “organized by civilians, run by civilians and funded by civilians”¹⁸. The commission helped greatly to establish good hygiene good sanitation. The U.S. Sanitary Commission eventually was the “forerunner¹⁹ for the founding of the American Red Cross.

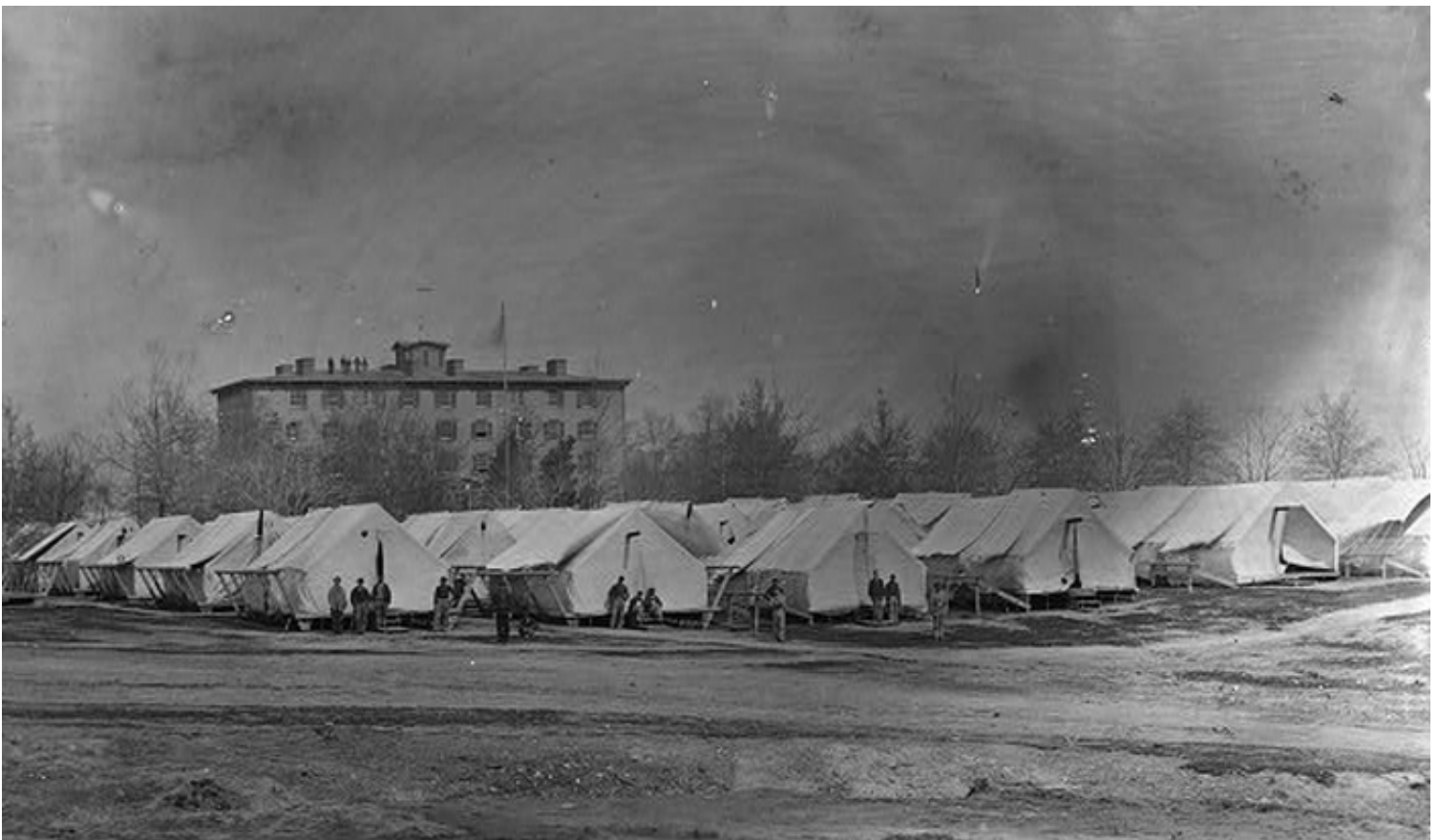


Figure 2

¹⁸ "Sanitary Commission American Civil War." Sanitary Commission American Civil War. Accessed 2015. http://americancivilwar.com/sanitary_commission.html.

¹⁹ "Sanitary Commission American Civil War." Sanitary Commission American Civil War. Accessed 2015. http://americancivilwar.com/sanitary_commission.html.

An overwhelming amount of soldiers died throughout the Civil War. For every “two soldiers [that] died of disease... every one [was] killed in battle”²⁰. Approximately 620,000 total soldiers died in the war. Two thirds of that number was not because of “enemy fire, but a force stronger than any army of men: disease”²¹. In a place where soldiers were supposed to heal and recover, they were forced to fight off terrible diseases such as: mumps, measles, typhoid fever, pneumonia, dysentery, and more. These diseases and other infections were the reason for thousands of deaths in the the medical camps. Embalming became the method to “preserve soldiers’ bodies for shipment home”²². The spices from embalming allowed the bodies not to smell, this also allowed multiple bodies to be buried together.

Medicine advancements at the time of the war came from the “heroic era”. This was when doctors purged and tried to “rebalance”²³ the body because they thought it healed their patients. The medical mistakes practiced in the Civil War were the result of modern medicine today. Jonathan Letterman, a surgeon helping the Union, was an

²⁰ "Medicine in the Civil War." Accessed 2015.

<http://www.utoledo.edu/library/canaday/exhibits/quackery/quack8.html>.

²¹ "Civil War Medicine." Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed 2015.

<http://www.civilwar.org/education/history/civil-war-medicine/civil-war-medicine.html>.

²² "Civil War Museum Exhibits." National Museum of Civil War Medicine. Accessed 2015.

<http://www.civilwarmed.org/national-museum-of-civil-war-medicine/exhibits/>.

²³ "Civil War Medicine." Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed 2015.

<http://www.civilwar.org/education/history/civil-war-medicine/civil-war-medicine.html>.

ambitious surgeon who came up with new ideas and “basic principles”²⁴ to treat patients. He started a new way of looking at the medical practice. As a result, the study of neurology and plastic reconstructive surgery were created. Letterman was soon referred to as the “father of the battlefield medicine”²⁵ because of his new ways to improve emergency medicine. He set up stations right near the battlefield for immediate care. In case someone needed immediate transport, he would order a “horse-drawn wooden ambulance”²⁶ to take wounded soldiers to the medical camps that would be a couple miles away. These technology improvements helped the Union at the time but

²⁴ "How the Civil War Changed Modern Medicine : DNews." DNews. Accessed 2015. <http://news.discovery.com/history/us-history/civil-war-modern-medicine-110331.htm>.

²⁵ "How the Civil War Changed Modern Medicine : DNews." DNews. Accessed 2015. <http://news.discovery.com/history/us-history/civil-war-modern-medicine-110331.htm>.

²⁶ "How the Civil War Changed Modern Medicine : DNews." DNews. Accessed 2015. <http://news.discovery.com/history/us-history/civil-war-modern-medicine-110331.htm>.

also started a new era that would start superior hospitals today. Figure 3 is an example



of an improved medical camp.

The Union and Confederate were not only fighting on the battlefield but also in the medical camps. They were in competition for who had the best medical advancements. The Union had an unfair advantage of having access to many resources. The Confederates were forced to resort to indigenous plants and other natural resources to help the wounded soldiers. The Union and Confederates “attempted to combat illness and improve medical care”²⁷, but it was clear that the Union was clearly dominant over the South. The Union focused on supplies and “man power”²⁸ to win the war not only on the battlefield but in the camps. The Union created a barrier

²⁷ "Civil War Medicine." Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed 2015.
<http://www.civilwar.org/education/history/civil-war-medicine/civil-war-medicine.html>.

²⁸ "Civil War Medicine." Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed 2015.
<http://www.civilwar.org/education/history/civil-war-medicine/civil-war-medicine.html>.

of transportation so that the Confederates were denied many supplies in order to save lives. This made it very difficult for the South to heal their patients accurately. Although the Union had a clear and unfair advantage, both the Union and Confederates wanted to prevent terrible diseases and medical improvement.