

Less Than Prepared

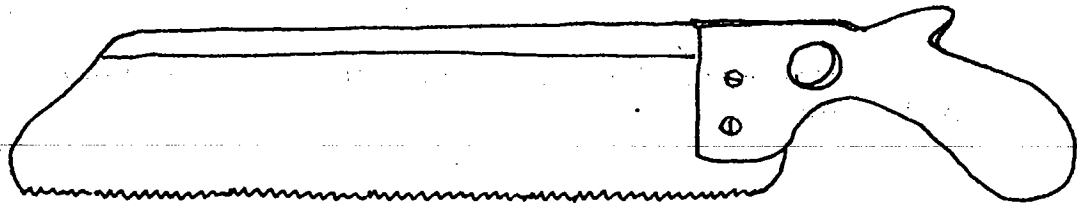
In both supplies and knowledge the North and South were woefully unprepared. At the start of the war there was not one general military hospital in the entire United States. The largest post hospital had only 41 beds. It was in Kansas. There were also no ambulances available for duty on either side. Private ambulances had to be hired during the First Battle of Bull Run.

The Confederate Army gave no entrance physical examinations at the beginning of the war. Any man who wanted to enlist could. As a result, many men who had no business suiting up for battle were admitted for duty. These were the men who were the first to fall under the adverse conditions of war. In the North the situation was somewhat better. Physicals were being conducted, but most of the effort went into detecting shirkers rather than screening the unfit.

Modern medical science was in its infancy at the beginning of the Civil War. Antiseptics in surgery were not used until 1865, when English surgeon Joseph Lister first used carbolic acid to sterilize wounds. In 1895, X rays were discovered by German physicist Wilhelm Roentgen, enabling surgeons to "see" inside the body. By today's standards, the practice of medicine during the Civil War was primitive.

The status of pharmacology was also sadly inadequate. Spanish fly, pokeweed, and hog's foot oil could be more easily found in a medicine bag at the war's outbreak than chloroform.

The military medical establishment made great advances during the war. Women, including future Red Cross founder Clara Barton, served as army nurses. The United States Sanitary Commission was created in 1861 to operate hospitals and distribute food, clothing, medicine, and other supplies. Horse-drawn ambulances and a trained ambulance corps were introduced in 1862. Interestingly, the real advances were in the area of administration of care and not in the science of caring for patients.



Lesson Not Learned

Both sides should have been more prepared for the number of casualties that the Civil War would bring, but they were not. The conventional wisdom of the time said that this war would not last long. Both sides predicted an early victory after just a few military engagements. Neither side was prepared to deal with sick and wounded soldiers. Many of those in charge believed the purpose of war was to kill, not heal.

The most recent war prior to the Civil War had been the Mexican War of the 1840s. It should have taught both the Union and the Confederacy two important lessons. The first lesson was that many soldiers would die of disease. More than twice as many soldiers died from disease as died on the battlefield during the Civil War. The second lesson should have been how deadly a wound can be. Thirteen percent of all wounded soldiers died during the Mexican War. If the Civil War military leaders had learned the importance of battlefield medicine, both sides might have been better prepared to treat their wounded and diseased soldiers who died by the thousands during the war.

The Deadliest Enemy

The average soldier spent more time marching and camping than he ever spent in battle. When he was engaged in battle, however, every moment, every move, every decision was potentially life-ending. Newspapers during the Civil War brought home the horrors of these battles with reports of the dead and dying left in the battlefields. Even today, many photographs of the Civil War are images of men's bodies lying in unnatural positions in open fields or trenches.

The power of those images has created the illusion that the suffering of the Civil War was mainly caused by the battles—men stopped dead in their tracks by a Minié ball, soldiers wounded and dying in the field, amputated arms and legs in a field hospital. Almost as many American soldiers died during the Civil War than in all other U.S. wars from the Revolution to Vietnam combined. But none of these images correctly identify the number-one killer of the Civil War soldier. Of the 623,026 soldiers who died during the Civil War, more than half of them died of disease.

Unfit to Eat or Drink

It is not hard to identify the causes for so much death-related sickness—poor diet, poor hygiene, and poor sanitation. The poor diet of both Northern and Southern soldiers is well documented in Chapter Three. Some diseases, such as scurvy, could be directly attributed to lack of specific vitamins or minerals. More importantly, however, was the likelihood that a poor diet would make it nearly impossible for a body infected with typhus or dysentery to adequately fight back.

The lack of pure drinking water is also to blame for disease. Camps were frequently pitched near a water source, but rarely was that water source scrutinized. Water from swamps, slow-moving streams, and even puddles was too frequently used. Even the large rivers such as the Ohio and Mississippi offered water that needed purification. In many camps, water was supplied by digging shallow holes in which ground or drainage water would accumulate. Help and advice from authorities was either useless or ignored. The U.S. Sanitary Commission advised that the water of the Mississippi was wholesome, and any discoloration caused by sediment from the Missouri River should be ignored. When authorities did recommend boiling water before using it, the war-weary troops seldom listened. They just held their breath and drank it.

