

Civil War Medical Care (3)

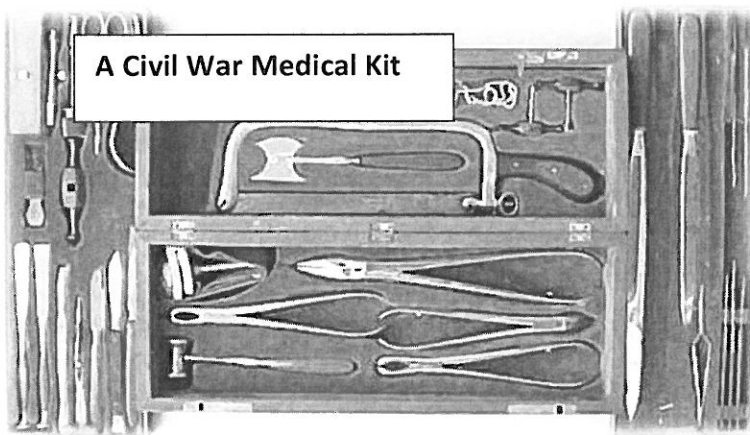
Reading

At the time of the Civil War, doctors did not understand infection, and did little to prevent it. It was a time before pain medication, anesthesia, and a time when there was no attempt to keep things clean during surgery. Surgeon operated on person after person with the same contaminated tools and without washing their hands. With no antibiotics available at this time, minor wounds could easily become infected, and then kill a person. While the typical soldier was at very high risk of being shot and killed in combat, he faced an even greater risk of dying from disease.

Twice as many men died of disease than of gunshot wounds in the Civil War. Dysentery, measles, small pox, pneumonia, and malaria were the soldier's greatest enemy. The overall poor hygiene in camp, the lack of adequate bathroom facilities, the cold and lack of shelter and suitable clothing, the poor quality of food and water, and the crowded condition of the camps made the typical camp a literal breeding ground for disease. Conditions, and resulting disease, were even worse for Civil War prisoners, who were held in the most miserable of conditions.

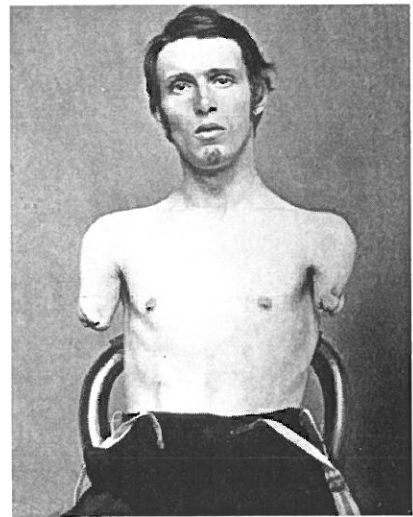
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Photographs



A Civil War Medical Kit

A Soldier who survived having
both arms amputated



A pile of amputated legs outside
of a Civil War medical tent

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Primary Sources

"The repair of wounds was always expected to be a slow, painful, and exhausting process. The cleanliness of wounds was regarded as of little or no importance. Even the dressings [bandages] carried into action were few and scanty [small]; the injured man covered his wounds as best he might with a dirty handkerchief or piece of cloth torn from a sweaty shirt."

Source: "The Photographic History of the Civil War, Volume IV"

Article by Edward L. Musnson, M.D. Major, Medical Department, United States Army

"It is the most sickening sight of the war, this tide of wounded flowing back. One has a shattered arm, and the sling in which he carries it is the same bloody rag the surgeon gave him the day of battle; another has his head seamed and bandaged so you can scarcely see it, another has his shoe cut off, and a great roll of rags around his foot, and he leans heavily on a rough cane broken from a pine tree; another breathes painfully and holds his hand to his side, where you see a ragged rent in his blouse; another sits by a puddle, dipping water on a wounded leg, which, for want of dressing since the battle, had become inflamed; another lies on a plot of grass by the roadside, with his browned face turned full to the sun, and he sleeps."

Source: Dr. William Morton, Battle of Fredericksburg, 1862