

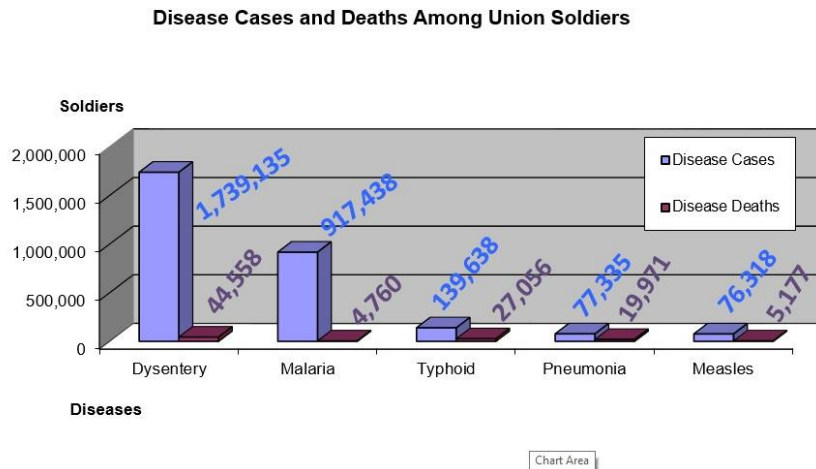
Civil War Medicine

DISEASE

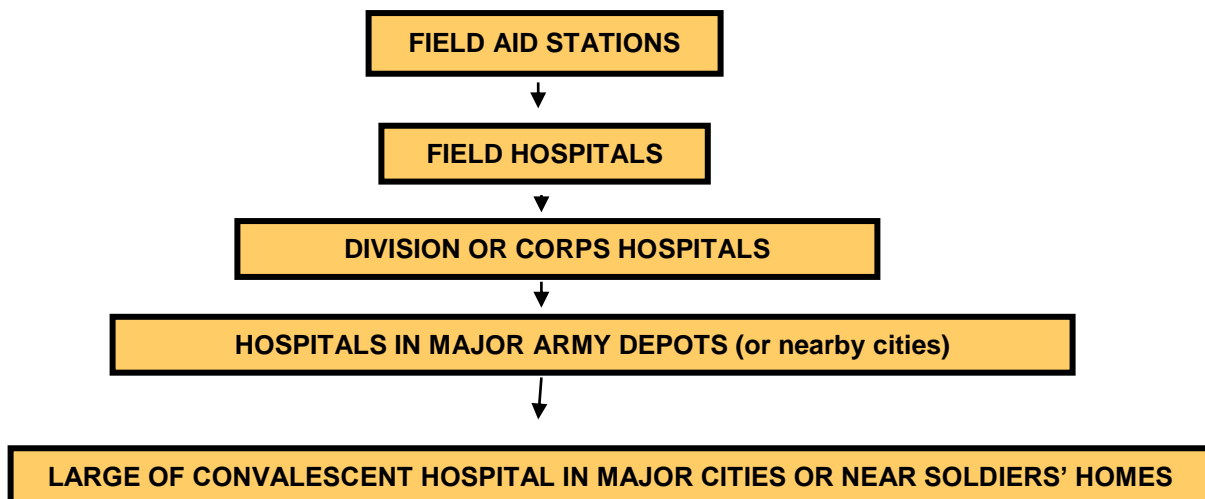
Disease was the deadliest foe of the American Civil War. The death from battle to disease ratio was 2:1. Of the 600,000+ soldiers who died, 400,000 died from disease. If we use “A Census-Based Count of the Civil War Dead” the ratio of those who died from disease is even higher.

The three main causes of disease were:

- * Inadequate pre-enlistment screening
- * Lack of immunity
- * Poor sanitation



William A. Hammond, the U.S. Surgeon General, and Dr. Jonathan Letterman, Medical Director of the Army of the Potomac introduced an orderly system for evacuating the wounded.



FIELD SURGERY

75% of wounds were to the extremities.

76% of wounds were caused by minié balls.

Amputation became the most common surgery of the war. There are 30,000 amputations on record for the Union; it is estimated that the Confederates performed an equal number. The overall mortality rate for an amputation was 26% (50% among civilians), prompting a boom in the prosthetics industry.

“If any fault was committed, it was that the knife was not used enough.”—J. Letterman.

By the time of the Civil War, anesthetics were commonly used. Of the 80,000 Union operations on record, only 254 were performed without anesthesia.

Following surgery, infection was the most frequent cause of death. Gangrene, a streptococcal infection, became a serious problem in permanent hospitals, especially during the second and third years of the war.

HOSPITAL SYSTEM

Over 1,000,000 soldiers received aid in federal military hospitals. Fewer than 9% of the patients died. There were 154 hospitals in the Confederacy. The Union had 431 hospitals, but probably only half of those were operating at one time.

Chimborazo in Richmond was possibly the largest military hospital in the world, treating 58,000 sick and 17,000 wounded soldiers.

NURSING

The Civil War played a major role in the development of the nursing profession in the United States. The Union army paid 18,000 women nurses and another 2,000 women served as volunteers. In the Confederacy, fewer women served as fulltime nurses.

Dorothea Dix—became superintendent of women nurses for the Union army.

Clara Barton—served as an independent nurse who traveled with the army.

Susie King Taylor—served unofficially as a nurse and wrote a memoir about her life.

Phoebe Yates Pember—served as a ward matron at Chimborazo Hospital in Richmond.

Sally Tompkins—served as the administrator of Robertson Hospital in Richmond.

Women played such a vital role as nurses that in the 1880's, the medical profession supported the establishment of civilian nursing schools for women.

LASTING CONTRIBUTIONS

- * An organized system of evacuation
- * Trained ambulance corps
- * Trained nursing corps
- * Thousands of records published as *The Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion* became American's first contribution to worldwide medicine.

Selected Sources:

Bollet, Alfred J. *Civil War Medicine: Challenges and Triumphs*. Tucson: Galen Press, LTD, 2002

Devine, Shauna. *Learning from the Wounded*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014.