A Woman of Valor

Clara Barton and the Civil War

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Clara rolled up her sleeves and went to work. She acquired an army wagon and a four-horse team, courtesy of Colonel Rucker's Quartermaster Department, and set off through town to distribute her hospital stores. These were the first field hospitals Clara ever visited after a battle, and she was aghast. Men with arms and legs blown away, faces mangled, stomachs torn open, and intestines hanging out lay on the floors in their own filth and blood, crying out for water or a merciful bullet. Their wrecked bodies testified to the devastating power of the modern .58 caliber rifled musket, whose conical bullet, the minié ball, tore through human flesh, "shattering, splintering, and splitting" bones and joints. Cannons loaded with canister were even more destructive. When fired at charging infantry, the whirling iron balls blasted gaping holes in the ranks in a shower of blood, pieces of skin, decapitated heads, and other body fragments. Those who survived the battlefield and were taken to the hospitals faced a second war more deadly than the shooting war itself. Here the enemy was infection, contagious disease, and medical ignorance. Since nobody knew what caused infection, surgeons operated in coats stained with pus and blood, their hands unwashed, their scalpels, saws, forceps, bone pliers, and sponges merely dipped in pails of tap water before the beginning of the next operation. They sewed up wounds with undisinfected silk, and when they had trouble threading the needle, moistened it with their own saliva.

In such places, the death rate was appalling. Some 87 percent of the soldiers with "penetrating" abdominal wounds died; 60 percent of those with skull wounds, 62.6 percent of those with wounds to the chest, and 33 percent of those with shoulder joint wounds also died. The luckless soldier with a bone-breaking wound in the knee or ankle, or a severe gunshot fracture in the arm or leg, hand or foot, faced almost certain amputation—the best means the surgeon knew to save his life. Clara had seen an amputation in Fredericksburg, but that did not prepare her for what she witnessed in Culpeper. Here surgeons amputated limbs by the score, and soldier nurses tossed them out the door into hideous piles. An experienced surgeon could perform a typical "guillotine" amputation in a couple of minutes or so. First, his attendants placed the patient on the operating table and the surgeon put him to sleep with ether or chloroform. If both were lacking—and they often were in the Culpeper hospitals—the victim might get a shot of whiskey, or simply a slab of leather placed between his teeth, so that he could bite down on it when he started screaming. According to procedure, the surgeon would slice through the flesh with a razor-sharp

knife, saw through the bone with a sharp-toothed saw, and snip off "jagged ends of bone" with pliers. Then he would place a clamp on the "spewing arteries," tie them with "oiled silk," apply a styptic, and dress the bloody stump, leaving it to heal "by granulation."

The odds of surviving an amputation were frightful. A man whose leg was sawed off at the hip stood only one chance in ten of living. The fatality rate for amputations at the thigh or the knee joint was more than 50 percent; for leg amputations as a whole, 34 percent; for shoulder joint amputations, 29 percent, for amputations of the upper arm, 25 percent; for ankle joint amputations, 7 percent; for amputations of the fingers or hand, 2.6 percent. All told, according to one authority, one-fourth of the wartime amputations resulted in death, "almost always of surgical fevers."

If the amputee survived the operation, he faced an uncertain convalescence, since his stump was bound to get infected. When an "odorless creamy pus" did appear three or four days after an amputation, Civil War surgeons pronounced it a *good* sign. They called it "laudable pus" and thought it nature's way of ridding the body of harmful tissue and thus a necessary part of the healing process.

It was beyond their understanding why infected stumps so often became gangrenous. "Hospital gangrene" turned the infected flesh into a black-green-purple-yellowish color and caused it to give off a sickeningly sweet stench that was overpowering. Harried surgeons tried to arrest gangrene with unsanitary knives, corrosive chemicals like nitric acid, and turpentine, charcoal, or chlorine. As the war progressed, a Union physician in the Department of the Ohio made the breakthrough discovery that bromine arrested hospital gangrene. An equally effective "medicine" proved to be the lowly maggot, which, by eating away the dead flesh, prevented the spread of infection and saved more than one life.

Clara was shocked at the filth in the Culpeper hospitals—their floors were slippery with blood, slime, and excrement. Since the overworked surgeons and attendants were too busy to clean the floors, Clara took care of that herself. She and her assistants would move the wounded to one side of the room and scrub the other side, then reverse the process. Clara even made bystanders help. At one hospital, a captain was dismayed to see her at work in such macabre surroundings. "Miss Barton," he told her, "this is a rough and unseemly position for you, a woman, to occupy."

"Is it not as rough and unseemly for these pain-wracked men?" Clara retorted.

Lizzie Shaver, describing her adventures at Fairfax Station. Since returning to Washington, she had found out what had happened at Chantilly during the thunderstorm. Rebel infantry had tried to flank Pope's battered army, but elements of the Ninth and Third corps had blocked their way. The Twenty-first Massachusetts had fought hard at Chantilly, suffering its worst casualties thus far. "The *Old 21st Mass.* lay between us and the enemy and they *couldn't pass*," Clara told Lizzie. But then she added, "God only knows who is lost." She was, she said, going to the hospitals now to search for her friends. "I have told you nothing of the old friends who met me among the wounded and dying on that bloody field. I have no heart to tell it today, but will sometime. . . . Oh, how I needed stores on that field. Two huge boxes from Jersey arrived today. I don't know where we shall need them next."

As Clara reported to Lizzie, Union forces were "all back again in the old places around the city—McClellan's Army is here again and he is in command of it all." And that he was. The Army of Virginia no longer existed. The War Department had consolidated what remained of it with the Army of the Potomac under McClellan's overall command, and McClellan was already at work reorganizing and disciplining his forces after the disaster of Second Bull Run. In six days of fighting, Pope had lost 16,000 casualties, including some 8,500 wounded—the Union's heaviest losses of any campaign thus far. To make room for the wounded, Surgeon General Hammond ordered 3,000 convalescent soldiers transferred to hospitals in Philadelphia. Even so, the wounded from Second Bull Run filled up all the hospitals in the Washington area and spilled over into the homes of "absent secessionists" in Alexandria. Even the Capitol became a temporary hospital for 2,000 wounded, who lay on cots in the rotunda, the corridors, and the great halls of the Senate and the House.

In the view of Surgeon General Hammond, Medical Inspector Coolidge, Olmsted of the Sanitary Commission, and everybody else with eyes to see, the Medical Department desperately needed an ambulance corps of trained personnel and a transportation system under its control (the ambulances still belonged to the Quartermaster Department). It was insane for the War Department to ignore the shortages of ambulances that had plagued relief efforts at Second Bull Run, or the outrageous behavior of the civilian teamsters hired to drive the vehicles that were available. This sorry and insubordinate lot stole blankets and food, drank up liquor intended for the wounded, and generally ignored their suffering charges in the back of the wagons. On September 7, Hammond sent a report to the War Department com-

plaining bitterly about "the frightful state of disorder existing in arrangement for removing the wounded from the field of battle. scarcity of ambulances, the want of organization, the drunkenness incompetency of the drivers, the total absence of ambulance attenc are now working their legitimate results. . . . The whole system sh be under the charge of the Medical Department. An ambulance c should be organized and set in instant operation."

But Henry Halleck, the current general-in-chief of the a opposed an independent ambulance corps under the Mec Department, on the grounds that the current system was perfectly quate, with the Quartermaster Department furnishing the ambula and drivers. This fast-talking, chain-smoking Phi Beta Kappa obje to any "effeminating comforts" that might spoil the soldiers— shirts and shoes. He sent Hammond's letter back to him wit emphatic NO scrawled on the back.

At that time, 600 Union wounded still lay on the Bull Run ba field. An improvised train of hacks, omnibuses, ambulances, and c vehicles retrieved them on September 9—ten days after the battle ended—and brought them back to Washington by moonlight.

"I am almost discouraged," surgeon Dunn wrote his wife from National Hotel; "we are now back to where we started last sprin the blood & treasure of the year lost, a magnificent army destroyed nothing gained. The prospects look darker to me now than ever."

The prospects looked even darker when Lee's victorious army inv Maryland, unleashing a late summer offensive that shook the e North. By September 6, the rebels were near Frederick, and nol could tell where they were headed—perhaps north into Pennsylv With uncustomary belligerence, McClellan ordered his army to m and promised to give "Bobbie Lee" the drubbing of his life through Friday and Saturday, soldiers tramped across the bridges Washington and swung along Pennsylvania Avenue to the steady of drums, column after column of blue-coated veterans marchin with bullet-torn flags, their rifled muskets slung across their shoul 85,000 of them fanning out westward on various streets and roads September 8, the army was moving through Maryland in three par columns, with an enormous train of 3,000 wagons strung out for n behind in a moving cloud of dust. The wagon train carried short ra and enough ammunition and forage for a week of campaigning, b

Clara wrote, and the "views are grand beyond description, the water is as romance could paint it, and literally filled and flowing with phosphorescent light. The breakers come in not infrequently eight feet high, and eighty rods long, one unbroken line of swelling surge, like a beautiful water fall, until it breaks with its own mighty weight, and in an instant the whole smooth swell is transformed into one long whitened sheet of dashing spray and all day the clear breeze from these rolling waters sweeps across the whole island, thru every camp and hospital, leaving no particle of miasm, or anything unhealthy."

For the next few days, soldiers came to the hospital suffering from all manner of wounds and ailments. Some had been shot by rebel snipers or had collapsed from heat exhaustion while digging the trenches for the artillery. Others came down with chills and fevers, which Clara thought had been contracted on the Sea Islands, from the "miasmic vapors" that rose from their thick vegetation. This was a standard diagnosis for her day: all the medical texts blamed malarial fevers on "miasmas emanating from stagnant waters" and vegetation. Nobody knew that the common mosquito carried the deadly malarial infection.

On July 16, sitting on the floor of her tent, Indian fashion, and using a box as her desk, Clara dashed off a note to Judge Ira Barton. From the front of her tent, she wrote, she could observe the Union military preparations for the coming battle. "Directly up the beach to our left as we face the sea is Fort Wagner, before which our troops are fortifying and entrenching with incredible speed. Our pickets lie directly under the gun and a raised head or hand is a certain mark for the sharpshooter. A little to the right lies the Monitor, a little further on two more, then a war sloop, then the Paul Jones, then 2 more men of war, with the springtide of yesterday the Old Iron Sides worked over the bar and took her place a little to the right of the 'Paul Jones' looking like a small village in herself with all her guns, rigging and sea of heads, a little off the outside [of] the bar lies the Wabash." Clara thought the wooden screw frigate *Wabash* "the handsomest ship" in the fleet; it rode the water "just like a swan." Armed with one 150-pounder Parrott, one 30-pounder Parrott, one ten-inch gun, and forty-two nine-inch guns, it was a veritable floating fortress.

On that same July 16, word reached the hospital that General Terry's command had fought a sharp skirmish with the rebels on James Island and that the *Canonicus*, with Elwell on board, had gone to help evacuate the division and bring it to Morris Island for the attack on Wagner. Correspondents would later describe what happened on James Island that day: some 2,200 Confederates, supported by 12-

soldiers stood in a "solid phalanx," as Clara described it, that stretched for a mile down the beach.

At about seven o'clock the Union artillery and warships stopped firing, and a strange silence settled on the island. All told that day, Federal guns had hurled an estimated 9,000 shells at Battery Wagner in what was perhaps the war's most vigorous barrage thus far. As the sun was setting behind James Island, General Strong, wearing a yellow handkerchief around his neck, rode to the front of the attacking columns with his aides and orderlies. He spoke to the Fifty-fourth from horseback: "Boys, I am a Massachusetts man, and I know you will fight for the honor of the State." He cautioned them to use only their bayonets. "Don't fire a musket on the way up, but go in and bayonet them at their guns."

By Clara's watch, it was 7:45 P.M. when the men of the Fifty-fourth stood up and dressed their lines. "Forward!" Shaw cried, and the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts stepped out with bayonets thrust forward and flags snapping in the breeze. They streamed past the Union batteries and headed up the thin strip of beach, with the darkening ocean on their right and Wagner looming ahead. In a moment, the beach became so narrow that the companies on the right found themselves marching in ankle-deep water. When they were within 200 yards of Wagner, shot and shell came hissing through the sky and struck the beach ahead of the regiment, indicating that the rebel batteries on Sumter and on James and Sullivan's islands had spotted it. Worse still, Wagner suddenly awakened with cannon bursts, and "a sheet of flame, followed by a running fire, like electric sparks, swept along the parapet," remembered Captain Luis Emilio. The Union bombardment had not silenced Wagner after all.

Clara was mesmerized. "The scene was grand beyond description," she wrote later. "A long line of phosphorescent light streamed and shot along the waves ever surging on our right. A little to [our] left marked that long dark line, moving steadily on—pace by pace—across that broad open space of glistening sand." Clara could hear the thud of rebel canister hitting the assaulting troops. Transfixed with horror, she watched as the black soldiers ran toward the fort now, Colonel Shaw in front with his drawn sword whipping the air. He led them into the moat in front of the rampart connecting the two bastions of the fort, scrambled up the banks, and clawed his way up the side of the rampart while artillery and muskets flashed, casting the scene in a pulsing light. Shaw was the first to reach the top of the rampart, and Clara could see

Correspondence with the Friends of the Missing Men of the United States Army, which continued in operation until 1868. She put little brother Jules on her payroll and was delighted for him when he married a girl named Mattie, who later bore him a daughter. Jules thanked her for allowing him to participate in such "honorable" work and credited her with making his life whole and happy.

In a final report to Congress, Clara recounted her record with justifiable satisfaction: all told her office had received 63,182 inquiries, written 41,855 letters, mailed 58,693 printed circulars, distributed 99,057 copies of her printed rolls, and identified 22,000 men, including those on Atwater's death register. She assumed that those not accounted for at that date—some 40,000 men—were dead and that their graves, if they had any, were not likely to be found. Only then, satisfied that she had done her duty, did Clara close her office and bring an end to her Civil War career.

It was a spectacular career by all counts. Had she been a soldier, as she had wanted most of all to be, her résumé of wartime accomplishments might have won her a congressional Medal of Honor. A great many of her contemporaries considered her the outstanding battlefield nurse and relief worker of either sex in the showcase eastern theater, perhaps of the entire war. Her pioneering efforts, in fact, had opened the way for other women to serve in battlefield hospitals in the East. Though frequently called an American Florence Nightingale, Clara had gone beyond Miss Nightingale, who had performed her great Crimean War service in the Barrack Hospital in Scutari, Turkey, 350 miles behind the lines on the Crimea. True, Miss Nightingale had gone to the hospitals in Balaclava near the close of the war, but she had never toiled on the battlefield itself and been under fire as had Clara Barton.

An efficient and effective "Sanitary Commission of one," Clara had also raised impressive quantities of supplies through her network of women's support groups and had personally taken those supplies to the army in the field, thanks to the wagons she had persuaded the Quartermaster Department to give to her. While Clara's individual operation hardly matched the collective efforts of the thousands of Soldiers' Aid Societies and the U.S. Sanitary Commission, her stores had comforted many a regiment and supplied several hard-pressed battlefield hospitals, whose surgeons were forever in her debt. The soldiers and surgeons would have challenged anyone

Clara's contributions hadn't made a difference. Certainly nobody else had done as much as she in acting as an individual conduit between the home front and the needy soldier on the battlefield. If Reid Mitchell is right, if the war's outcome owed much to the perseverance of the Union's common soldiers, then credit Clara Barton and the other women of the war for reinforcing their resolve.

Add to all this Clara's work as unofficial matron of a field hospital on the Richmond-Petersburg front in 1864 and her role in the grave-marking pilgrimage to Andersonville in 1865, not to mention her search for missing soldiers, which she had conducted through her own office with energy and skill, and it was clear why Clara could view her career with pride. Even more remarkable, Clara had attained all this independently, without institutional affiliation or official government appointment. By dint of her driving will and her ability to exploit the male military and political bureaucracies, she had overcome "the fearful odds" against a woman serving in the field in wartime and had cared for wounded and infected male strangers without compromising her reputation as a respectable "lady."

By nursing shattered men in the hell of combat, standing under fire with only her will as a shield, Clara Barton offered her generation, and all succeeding generations, a profound measure of valor.