

**AN OVERVIEW OF THE U.S. ARMY MEDICAL CORPS OF  
THE CIVIL WAR  
THE REGIMENTAL ASSISTANT SURGEON  
AND  
DR. A. T. HAMILTON of the 148th P.V.I.**

As compiled by: L. E. RICHARD

It may seem a strange principal to enunciate as the first requirement in a hospital  
that it should do the sick no harm

Florence Nightingale, *Notes on Hospitals*, 1859

I would like to dedicate this work to all the men and women of the 148th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry Company "C" Reenactors, without who's inspiration it would have not been possible. I would also like to give a special thanks to Candace Glantz for her inspiration to make this subject more readable.

*Candace,  
Thank again*

*James*

## INTRODUCTION

As reenactors, we always strive to do our best in our impressions. I have found that at most events the Medical Service falls a bit short. Almost everyone doing a Medical impression wants to be a Brigade Surgeon working out of a Corps hospital. All but forgotten ( on the most part ) is the Regimental Assistant Surgeon working in the field. So I started to research the Assistant Surgeon, and DR. A. T. Hamilton of the 148th P.V.I; who I portray. The following is the result of my two year research, but, it is far from the definitive work on either the Army Medical Corps, or Dr. A. T. Hamilton. I do however hope that this will give you an idea of how the Medical Corps operated, and puts a face on Dr. Hamilton. As for me it has given me a new respect for the men who fought in the Civil War, and the men who worked so hard to keep them alive. I hope that you find it informative, and enjoyable, and I hope that if you ever had the urge to research any part of the Civil War, this gives you some inspiration to do so.

## THE ARMY MEDICAL CORPS, AND THE REGIMENTAL SURGEON

Prior to 1861 the Army Medical Department did not look anything like it does today, or even like it did during the Civil War. It was a division of the Quartermasters Corps, and a small division at that. It was made up of a Surgeon General, thirty surgeons, and eighty three assistant surgeons. These surgeons were not attached to any one unit, but they were sent to wherever they were needed. The number of surgeons were cut drastically at the start of the conflict with twelve surgeons, and thirty one assistant surgeons setting out for the south. This left only seventy officers in the entire army.

Doctor William A. Hammond became the Surgeon General at the start of the war. When he did, he made many changes. Those changes were to the delight of the younger doctors, and made many enemies among the "old school" doctors that have been around for many years, and didn't mind how the service was running. His first order of business was to break away from the Quartermasters Corps, forming for the first time the "Army Medical Corps". Following that came other changes like, the appointment of a Medical Inspector General who's job it would be to examine and expand the regular Army Medical Corps, and to create state level examinations for volunteer doctors. Doctor Hammond also created the post of Brigade Surgeon, who was not attached to any Regiment. Once the army was divided into "Armies", he created the post of Medical Director for each.

Doctor Hammond named Doctor Jonathan Letterman as the Medical Director of the Army of the Potomac. Dr. Letterman then took the ball and ran with it. He developed the hospital steward system, improved the nursing system, created an Ambulance Corps for the Army of the Potomac which became the standard for the entire U.S. army in 1864.

At the same time there was a large influx of doctors entering the service, both very competent, and some not so competent. Doctor Letterman could see the results when an incompetent doctor began working on the wounded. The soldiers, and officers began to distrust all surgeons. This was unacceptable to Letterman, so he stepped up the creation of state level examinations. In late 1862 this was put in place. The examinations were harsh to say the least, and no Regimental surgeon, or assistant surgeon was allowed to take to the field until this examination was passed. The test was in two parts. The first was a two hour oral

geography, zoology, literature, natural philosophy, and languages. The second part was a three hour written test testing him in the areas of: surgery, anatomy, the practice of medicine, pathology, physiology, pharmacology, obstetrics, medical jurisprudence and toxicology, chemistry, and hygiene. Once these tests were passed the surgeon received his commission from his state's Governor, and could then receive his supplies, and report to his regiment.

Surgeons were issued a Medical Pannier containing medicines, and some instruments, and bandage material. This kit was, however, far from complete, although it did carry up to 52 different medicines, (in small quantities), and instruments to preform minor surgery. There were also several other specialized instrument kits, such as several sizes of surgeon's operating cases, dental care cases, and a Meteorological instrument case. The latter being needed since the surgeon was responsible for giving the company commander a daily weather report. The surgeons also carries a large quantity of what was labeled "Spiritus Absolutus" or Medicinal whiskey, of which 2,430,785 quarts were dispensed during the war by the Medical Corps. This was to the delight of many a "thirsty" soldier since the Provost Guard would confiscate any alcohol that they found, but NOT medication. So, the men quickly learned to report to the surgeon for pains, and aches receiving this fine elixir to combat them.

Due to size constraints it did not have room for everything that would be needed in battle, so if the surgeon felt that he needed more than what was in it he had to buy it himself.

The surgeon, like all Officers had to buy his own uniform, and find his own way to the Regiment.

## REGIMENTAL MEDICAL SERVICES SET UP & OPERATIONS

Each Regiment had at least three, or four surgeons. At the head of this system was the Regimental Surgeon. He was usually a Major, or Lieutenant Colonel. Under him would be several Assistant Surgeons who were usually First, or Second Lieutenants. The Regimental, and most of the assistant surgeons were brigaded to the Corps hospital most times, leaving only one or two assistant surgeons in the field to treat the men of the Regiment on a daily basis, and to set up dressing stations ( field hospitals). The one big problem that was encountered in the field was the fact that the Medical Panniers were kept with the ambulances, in the wagon train because of their size. Therefore, the only equipment that the assistant surgeons had with them in the field, (most times), was what they could carry, or what could be put on horses, or mules. This proved most unsettling at Gettysburg as the medical wagon train was a full twenty - five miles away.

During battle the assistant surgeons would control bleeding, give Morphine, and Opium for pain, and preform basic surgery that may be needed to keep the wounded stable on their long, ( maybe two or three mile ) ambulance trip to the Corps Hospital. It was not unusual for the assistant surgeons to work more than thirty hours during, and after the battle on the wounded soldiers of both sides. If the army retreated, leaving the field hospital, and surgeons behind, they would keep on working hoping that the enemy would not interfere in their important work. In most cases the rebels did not, and even returned the surgeon to the north after his work was completed. There were some cases however where the surgeon chose to become a prisoner rather than leave their charges.

When in camp hours turned to days, and days to weeks, as the monotony of life went on six days in a row. The only change in the surgeons schedule came on Sunday when he accompanied the Regiment to Sunday Service. a typical day in the camp life of the assistant surgeon looked something like this:

6:00am - Rise

6:15am - Report to the First Sergeant for morning rounds of men already on "sick call".

7:00am - Breakfast

7:30am - The First Sergeant would call "Surgeons Call". He would then present the men responding to the surgeon, who would then only examine, and pass out medications.

8:30am - The written "early sick report" would be written and handed to the First Sergeant.

9:00am - Officers Surgeons Call. This would include N.C.O.s', Lieutenants, Captains, and Majors. Lt. Colonels and above would be examined and treated at the Brigade Hospital, ( mainly for reasons of rank ).

10:00am - Daily reports made out and presented to the Regimental Commander.

10:30am - Set up for surgery

11:00am - Surgery

1:30pm - Lunch

2:00pm - Return to surgery ( if needed ), or this time is used to drill the Hospital Corps.

4:00pm - Dressing changes

5:00pm - Daily reports are done and sent to the Regimental Surgeon. Also daily Requisitions are done and sent to Head Quarters.

6:00pm - Recheck of patients

7:30pm - Supper

8:30pm - Surgeons time to himself

9:30pm - to bed and a well deserved rest.

It should be noted that emergency surgery could interrupt the surgeons schedule at any time.

No surgeon could do his job as efficiently without the assistance of support staff. That staff included Hospital Stewards, Nurses ( both male and female ), and the Chaplain who were all his right, and left hands in the care of the sick, and wounded.

The Hospital Stewards acted as the pharmacists for the Regiment. He was also the surgeons assistant in the field carrying the hospital knapsack. The knapsack when full weighed at least fifty pounds. Although the hospital steward had a great many duties, he never forgot that he was an enlisted man.

Male nurses consisted of enlisted men detailed for the purpose of assisting the surgeon in his duties. After they were no longer needed, they were returned to their original duties. This system left a lot to be desired since the same men were not always detailed to nursing duties, and the surgeon had little time to train new nurses. Mrs. Dorothea Dix had volunteered her services to the union army for the purpose of organizing a Nurses Corps, however she turned away more prospective nurses than she admitted. This was due to a number of points including a very strict dress code that said that all nurses shall dress in basic black, or grey. Her dress code also forbade the use of hoop skirts, or jewelery. She also said that no women under the age of thirty need apply. Mrs. Dix even turned away some Catholic Nuns questioning their reasons for applying. The



surgeons in the field however either didn't know, or didn't care about her "rules", and their only questions were, " What are you willing to do?", and " When can you start?" It was soon learned that the female nurses learned quickly, and brought with them a feminine touch that eased human agony, and suffering. They also very quickly learned to take charge of patient care in the hospital wards.

The Regimental Chaplain was also used a great deal by the assistant surgeons. They accompanied the surgeon into the field, helping in the care of the wounded, helping those that could walk to the rear, and ministering to the dying. In camp the chaplain, along with their own duties would assist the surgeon, and nurses in surgery, and in patient care, such as dressing changes.

All in all there were a great many accomplishments during the Civil War. In the first year of the war the mortality rate of the wounded was 38% . By 1863, just two years later it was down to 14.2%. The fatalities were mostly from head wounds, abdominal wounds, or from diseases. Two out of every three that died during the Civil War died from disease.

**DR. ALFRED THORLEY HAMILTON**  
**ASSISTANT SURGEON OF THE 148th REGIMENT P.V.I.**

Doctor A. T. Hamilton was born on June 1, 1836 in Cumberland County Pennsylvania. His family moved to Lewistown Pennsylvania in 1844. As he grew up his parents lived next to doctor Jonathan Hughes, one of Lewistown's finest doctors. Spending much time with the good doctor, he soon learned that he wanted to go into medicine. He learned much from doctor Hughes, and when it was time he went to the Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia. After the first year he transferred to Bellevue Hospital in New York from where he graduated on February 27, 1858.

He came back to Lewistown, to take over the practice of doctor Hughes who wanted to retire. He married his wife Camilla ( who gave him five fine children), two years later. When the war broke out his practice was thriving, but Dr. Hamilton saw the continuing flow of wounded men coming through town. This moved him greatly, but with his practice he wasn't sure what he could do to help. Doctor Hughes saw this conflict in Hamilton and gave him a special Christmas gift in 1862, he came out of retirement so Dr. Hamilton could join the army.

Dr. Hamilton left for Harrisburg on February 2, 1863 and joined the 148th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers. In Harrisburg he took his state examinations and received some of the highest scores recorded. He then received his Commission from Governor Curtin, and left for Falmouth Virginia, where the 148th was now in winter quarters.

After he arrived in Virginia it was the time for the 148th to have night picket duty. When he found out that any man wounded, or hurt during the night would have to lay there until morning, he was shocked. He then took his blanket, and medical kit, and went out with the men, remaining there until morning when the pickets returned to camp. This may have been the first extraordinary thing that he did, but it was far from the last. Doctor Hamilton also participated in drill, fatigue duty, policing the camp, and dress parade. At Falmouth, he was the only Surgeon in the entire Second Corps that fell in for dress parade. When the 148th was inspected, his hospital was also inspected, and declared "The best in the Army".

He was also very proud of the 148th and it's actions, writing many letters back home that were published in the "Lewistown Gazette". He spoke highly of the 148th's motivation in its duties, talking about the " advancing movements of

the Regiment, never looking back." He also wrote a letter from Potomac Hospital, near Falmouth giving a "vivid" account of the fighting at Chancellorsville.

It wasn't all work, however, it should be noted that he took part, with the men of the 148th, in "Provision Procuring Excursions" on several occasions. One time they found a side of beef, and another they liberated a keg of whisky that just happened to be in the camp of the Irish Brigade. This last time was the only time that it is recorded that he received a reprimand from the Colonel. He had helped to empty that keg, and therefore became somewhat drunk, ( not on duty however) .

He worked very hard during battle, as was noted in a letter after the battle of Gettysburg. He had set up his field hospital in the house of the Hummelbaugh family, which was less than a mile from some of the fiercest fighting. Two other Assistant Surgeons from other Regiments reported to him to help in the work at hand. The three of them started work on July 2, and didn't stop until July 4. In that time it was recorded that they took care of 672 wounded soldiers from both sides. One of the wounded that Dr. Hamilton took care of himself was General Barksdale of Mississippi who was mortally wounded on July 2.

On October 30, 1864 he took over the duties of the Regimental Surgeon for the Second Logan Guard ( the 49th Regiment P.V.I. from Mifflin County ). Even though he was elsewhere, he was never far from the 148th, and according to the records of the Mifflin County Historical Society, he mustered out with the 148th in June of 1865.

When he returned to Lewistown, he again took over his practice. This was short lived however since he was soon appointed to the post of Health Officer for the Borough of Lewistown, Freedom Forge ( Burnham ), and the townships of Derry, Decatur, and Granville, by the State. He held this post until 1907. During that time he never forgot his friends of the 148th. Anytime that there was a need among them for medical care he went without question, or cost to the member of the unit. Through his days of service to the 148th, he never commanded, nor, demanded respect, he earned it!

Doctor Hamiltons service to the community did not stop there. He along with Rev. John Thrush organized the first G.A.R. Post in Lewistown. He was also very active and at times an officer in: The Independent Order of Odd Fellows, the Knights of Malta, the Knights of the Golden Eagle, and the Masonic Lodge. This activity lasted until his heart gave out at 3:15am on May 9, 1911.

The "Lewistown Daily Sentinel" on May 12, 1911 reported on his funeral. An excerpt of that article said:

### **LARGE FUNERAL OF DR. A. T. HAMILTON**

One of the most largely attended Funerals held in Lewistown in years was that of Dr. A. T. Hamilton this afternoon from his late home NO. 15 South Dorcas Street.

Delegations from five organizations were in attendance - The G.A.R. and the remaining members of the 148th Regiment of Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry gave a most impressive service.....

Doctor Hamiltons wife Camilla lived on until 1936 when she too died, and was laid to rest next to her husbands simple grave.

This work could not have been completed without the help of the following works & Organizations:  
*Doctors in Blue*. George Worthington Adams, Louisiana State University Press 1996  
*Medical & Surgical History of the war of the Rebellion*, William Hammond MD. editor 1865  
*Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Civil War Medical Instruments and Equipment, Vol I, II, & III*, DR. Gordon Dammann, Pictorial Histories Publishing Company, 1996  
*The Written History of the 148th Regiment P.V.I.*  
The 148th Regiment P.V.I. Reenactors  
and the help of the Mifflin County Historical Society, its Library, and staff