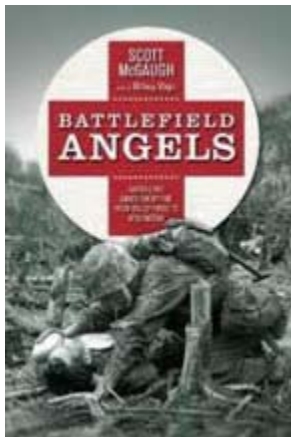




Battlefield Angels: Saving Lives Under Enemy Fire from Valley Forge to Afghanistan

By Scott McGaugh

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Photos, notes, bibliography, index, 282 pp., 2011, Osprey, www.ospreypublishing.com, \$24.95.

Warfare has always been the tragic school of medical knowledge and innovation. With every advancement in weaponry has come a corresponding response by the military medical corps to save lives.

Scott McGaugh has written a fantastic book on the history of the American military medical system. It is a story full of bravery and overcoming horrible conditions that have led to advances that save lives in combat and in ordinary life today. He delivers a narrative showing how the military medical service evolved from an ignored and understaffed unit composed mostly of men unfit to fight to a modern team of highly skilled and professional men and women.

McGaugh gives a linear history of American warfare alongside the medical developments. He discusses most of America's military conflicts in chapters arranged by medical subjects, such as burns, shock, infection, and even mental health. His primary focus is on World War II.

He dedicates one chapter to the Civil War, but even this brief attention is both informative and fascinating. Many new technologies emerged to make the fighting more gruesome and deadly.

The destructive force of the Minie ball, combined with improved artillery and rifles, far outpaced the medical units treating the wounded. At the onset of the war, the Union medical staff was a paltry 87 men, most with no battlefield or even surgical experience.

During the Civil War, hospitals were makeshift, set up in churches, homes, or even outdoors. Abdominal, head and chest wounds were almost always fatal, and extremity wounds were usually treated by amputation.

McGaugh describes in graphic detail men, with little or no anesthetic, enduring barbaric surgeries by inexperienced and overwhelmed doctors under primitive hygienic conditions. These operations often led to an enemy far more deadly than combat: infection. Sepsis and gangrene

from surgery and unsanitary hospitals conducive to malaria and typhoid led far more soldiers to their graves than battle.

McGaugh introduces a hero of the Civil War — Union physician Jonathan Letterman. He recognized that no system was in place to evacuate and manage the wounded, who were piling up in numbers far greater than in any previous American war.

Letterman established an ambulance corps in response to the abandonment of injured men on the battlefield, often left to die in horrific suffering. He also established a front-line treatment protocol to address immediate issues of bleeding and pain before sending soldiers to surgeons and hospitals.

McGaugh creates an engaging narrative of medical history side by side with generations of battlefield heroism, and he is able to explain complex diseases, injuries and their treatments in an easy-to-understand fashion. He includes excerpts from letters and diaries, along with interviews of frontline medics.

Most admirable is his introducing readers to an often overlooked part of the military — men and women demonstrating amazing bravery and brilliance, and sometimes using the most primitive tools and methods, to save lives. You can't help coming away stunned at the achievements of the frontline military corpsmen and medical teams, and this book is a much deserved homage to their service.

Reviewer: David A. Galli

Dave Galli is a private practice physician in St. Louis, MO and Instructor of Medicine at St. Louis University Medical School. He has a degree in history from St. Louis University and a long-time interest in the Civil War.