

Healing Wounds

Cornelia Hancock

Of about two million federal troops who served in the Civil War, 360,000 died. Among the more than one million who served in the Confederate military, some 250,000 also perished. Only one in three of these died of battle wounds; the others succumbed to disease or accident. About a half million were wounded, many of them severely.

A badly wounded man had only a precarious chance for survival. Little was known about infection, and military surgeons performed operations without taking sanitary precautions. Soldiers contracted gangrene and other deadly infections. Though anesthetics were known, doctors did not always have them on hand, and major surgery often resulted in shock, followed by death. Long delays occurred when transporting casualties to medical aid stations or hospitals. Soldiers suffered as well from the mosquitos, lice, and biting flies that infested the battlefield and that spread diseases such as malaria and yellow fever. Poor diet also undermined health, although the less well-supplied Confederate soldiers suffered from malnourishment to a far greater degree than Union troops.

Cornelia Hancock (1840–1927), from a New Jersey Quaker family, was one of thousands of women who worked to improve health care for the Union Army. In 1863, she volunteered to be a nurse, but Dorothea Dix, then Superintendent of Female Nurses, rejected her application, disapproving of nurses who were attractive or under thirty. Cornelia, twenty-three and pretty, simply traveled to Gettysburg, arriving on the third day of the battle and going right to work helping the wounded. Her account vividly renders the many horrors of Civil War battles. It also illuminates the reactions of friends at home to her decision to strike out on such an unladylike course.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How does Cornelia Hancock respond to the suffering around her?
2. Why do people at home complain about what Hancock is doing? What is her response to them?
3. How does Hancock respond to escaped slaves? How does her response compare to that of those around her?

HANCOCK'S ACCOUNT OF HER FIRST DAY AT GETTYSBURG

We arrived in the town of Gettysburg on the evening of July sixth, three days after the last day of battle. We were met by Dr. Horner, at whose house we stayed. Every barn, church, and building of any size in Gettysburg had been converted into a temporary hospital. We went the same evening to one of the churches, where I saw for the first time what war meant. Hundreds of desperately wounded men were stretched out on boards laid across the high-backed pews as closely as they could be packed together. The boards were covered with straw. Thus elevated, these poor sufferers' faces, white and drawn with pain, were almost on a level with my own. I seemed to stand breast-high in a sea of anguish....

Learning that the wounded of the Third Division of the Second Corps, including the 12th Regiment of New Jersey, were in a Field Hospital about five miles outside of Gettysburg, we determined to go there early the next morning, expecting to find some familiar faces among the regiments of my native state. As we drew near our destination we began to realize that war has other horrors than the sufferings of the wounded or the desolation of the bereft. A sickening, overpowering, awful stench announced the presence of the unburied dead, on which the July sun was mercilessly shining, and at every step the air grew heavier and fouler, until it seemed to possess a palpable horrible density that could be seen and felt and cut with a knife. Not the presence of the dead bodies themselves, swollen and disfigured as they were, and lying in heaps on every side, was as awful to the spectator as that deadly, nauseating atmosphere which robbed the battlefield of its glory, the survivors of their victory, and the wounded of what little chance of life was left to them.

As we made our way to a little woods in which we were told was the Field Hospital we were seeking, the first sight that met our eyes was a collection of semi-conscious but still living human forms, all of whom had been shot through the head, and were considered hopeless. They were laid there to die and I hoped that they were indeed too near death to have consciousness. Yet many a groan came from them, and their limbs tossed and twitched. The few surgeons who were left in charge of the battlefield after the Union army had started in pursuit of Lee had begun their paralyzing task by sorting the dead from the dying, and the dying from those whose lives might be saved; hence the groups of prostrate, bleeding men laid together according to their wounds.

There was hardly a tent to be seen. Earth was the only available bed during those first hours after the battle. A long table stood in this woods and around it gathered a number of surgeons and attendants. This was the operating table, and for seven days it literally ran blood. A wagon stood near rapidly filling with amputated legs and arms; when wholly filled, this gruesome spectacle withdrew from sight and returned as soon as possible for another load. So appalling was the number of the wounded as yet unsuccored, so helpless seemed the few who were battling against tremendous odds to save life, and so overwhelming was the demand for any kind of aid that could be given quickly,

that one's senses were benumbed by the awful responsibility that fell to the living. . . .

I need not say that every hour brought an improvement in the situation, that trains from the North came pouring into Gettysburg laden with doctors, nurses, hospital supplies, tents, and all kinds of food and utensils: but that *first* day of my arrival, the sixth of July, and the third day after the battle, was a time that taxed the ingenuity and fortitude of the living as sorely as if we had been a party of shipwrecked mariners thrown upon a desert island.

LETTERS

Gettysburg, Pa. July 7th, 1863

My Dear Cousin

I am very tired tonight; have been on the field all day — went to the 3rd Division 2nd Army Corps. I suppose there are about five hundred wounded belonging to it. They have one patch of woods devoted to each army corps for a hospital. I being interested in the 2nd, because Will [her brother] had been in it, got into one of its ambulances, and went out at eight this morning and came back at six this evening. There are no words in the English language to express the sufferings I witnessed today. The men lie on the ground; their clothes have been cut off them to dress their wounds; they are half naked, have nothing buthardtack to eat only as Sanitary Commissions, Christian Associations, and so forth give them. I was the first woman who reached the 2nd Corps after the three days fight at Gettysburg. I was in that Corps all day, not another woman within a half mile. Mrs. Harris was in first division of 2nd Corps. I was introduced to the surgeon of the post, went anywhere through the Corps, and received nothing but the greatest politeness from even the lowest private. . . . To give you some idea of the extent and numbers of the wounds, four surgeons, none of whom were idle fifteen minutes at a time, were busy all day amputating legs and arms. I gave to every man that had a leg or arm off a gill of wine, to every wounded in Third Division, one glass of lemonade, some bread and preserves and tobacco — as much as I am opposed to the latter, for they need it very much, they are so exhausted.

I feel very thankful that this was a successful battle; the spirit of the men is so high that many of the poor fellows said today, "What is an arm or leg to whipping Lee out of Penn." I would get on first rate if they would not ask me to write to their wives; *that* I cannot do without crying, which is not pleasant to either party. I do not mind the sight of blood, have seen limbs taken off and was not sick at all.

It is a very beautiful, rolling country here; under favorable circumstances I should think healthy, but now for five miles around, there is an awful smell of putrefaction. Women are needed here very badly, anyone who is willing to go to field hospitals, but nothing short of an order from Secretary Stanton or General Halleck will let you through the lines. Major General Schenk's order for us was not regarded as anything; if we had not met Miss Dix at Baltimore Depot, we should not have gotten through. It seems a strange taste but I am glad we did.

We stay at Doctor Horner's house at night — direct letters care of Dr. Horner, Gettysburg, Pa. If you could mail me a newspaper, it would be a great satisfaction, as we do not get the news here and the soldiers are so anxious to hear; things will be different here in a short time.

Cornelia

3rd Division — 2nd Army Corps Hospital
Gettysburg, Pa. July 26th [1863] — Sunday

My Dear Mother

Today is Sunday but there is no semblance of it here. It is now about five o'clock in the morning. Our hospital has been moved and our stores have given out. There is nothing to cook with, hence I have nothing to do, and therefore, have time to write.

... I have eight wall tents full of amputated men. The tents of the wounded I look right out on. It is a melancholy sight — but you have no idea how soon one gets used to it. Their screams of agony do not make as much impression on me now as the reading of this letter will on you. The most painful task we have to perform here is entertaining the friends who come from home and see their friends all mangled up. I do hate to see them. Soldiers take everything as it comes, but citizens are not inured. You will think it is a short time for me to get used to things, but it seems to me as if all my past life was a myth, and as if I had been away from home seventeen years.

... What I do here one would think would kill at home, but I am well and comfortable. When we get up early in the morning, our clothes are so wet that we could wring them. On they go, and by noon they are dry.

From thy affectionate daughter —
C. Hancock

Jan. 1864

Dear William [Cornelia's brother]

Where are the people who have been professing such strong abolition proclivity for the last thirty years? Certainly not in Washington laboring with these people whom they have been clamoring to have freed. They are freed now or at least many of them, and herded together in filthy huts, half clothed. And what is worse than all guarded over by persons who have not a proper sympathy for them. I have been in the Washington Contraband¹ Hospital for the past two months. It is in close proximity to the Camp of Reception [where the patients first arrived] — and I have had ample opportunity to see these people, the persons in charge of them, and the whole mode of proceeding with them. Their wants are great and appeal in every way for aid from the North.

1. **contraband:** A black slave who escaped or was brought to the North.

. . . Smallpox has raged here to a great extent but a separate hospital has been established for that now. The order now is to remove all contrabands south of the Potomac. It may be better there than here, but we remain under the same authority and let me state emphatically that nothing for the permanent advancement of these people can be effected until the whole matter is removed from the military authority and vested in a separate bureau whose sole object is the protection and elevation of these people.

. . . There is much charity being extended to our poor soldiers and I would note that any one should withhold one mite from them, but I maintain that persons living in their comfortable homes in the North should give liberally to those so sadly situated as these forlorn contrabands, as well as to the soldiers. A national Sanitary Commission for the Relief of Colored Persons of this class would save lives and a great deal of suffering. The slaves generally get free when our army advances; they come into our lines several hundred at a time, follow the army for a while, then come into Washington, some probably having walked 50 miles. One woman carried one child in her arms and dragged two by her side. Judge of the condition of that woman when she arrives. Should not some comfortable quarters await her weary body?

Thy sister,
Cornelia H.

[In February 1864 Cornelia became a nurse with the Army of the Potomac, then headquartered near Brandy Station, Virginia.]

3rd Div. 2 Corps Hospital
March 25, 1864

My Dear Sister

. . . On Wednesday we received orders to send all the sick and wounded to Washington, along with the order came a snow storm, along with the snow storm came an orderly countermanding the previous order, along with him came a splendid morning, along with it, came another orderly ordering to move on Thursday; and at 8 o'clock we had them all loaded and on stretchers, and proceeded with the long train from the three hospitals to Brandy station. There the platform was strewed full of helpless men wounded at Morton's Ford. How like Gettys[burg] it seemed to me. I had all our worst cases put in a pile, took a whiskey bottle, and sat down and helped the poor souls to live while they were loaded. Two mortal hours we sat in the sun and heard the locomotive hiss, the cars back and go ahead, then back, etc., etc., etc., just what always happens at depots. One of our nice wounded wanted to give me some greenbacks right in the hubbub. There were two women who stay at the station with hot tea, etc. They supplied all hands and retired. There I sat, I suppose five hundred men staring at me, but Dr. Miller and our own steward and hospital boys were with me and I did not care. By dint of great perseverance a hospital car was provided for the worst cases and I went in and saw them lying comfortably upon the

stretchers, saw the cars trudge off with their groaning load, and think I to myself, the idea of making a business of maiming men is not one worthy of a civilized nation. By the time I got home over the corduroy [a bumpy road] had a headache of the first water, went to bed, and there could lay, as my occupation is nearly gone now. . . .

from thy affectionate sister
Cornelia Hancock

3rd Div. 2 Corps Hosp.
March 27, 1864

My Dear Mother

... Our hospital will soon fill up with sick unless they move. Then what will become of us is unknown — Ellen is fretting for fear I shall go on a march. My only answer to all such worriments is you ought to have confidence enough in my judgment to think I will do the best thing. After campaigning successfully for 9 months I ought to have some experience. In regard to Salem people thinking I ought to have a woman to sleep with me, I am much better guarded than the lone widows and maids at Isabell's. Another woman is not needed nor would be allowed here. Mrs. Lee is within sending distance if I was sick, so calm all your fears. I go to sleep just as quick as I touch the bed, am used to being alone, like it, and never feel lonely and would not sleep with Mrs. Lee if I could. I am sorry you have any distress on my account, but I cannot help you any and I assure you it is all unnecessary.

... Sarah Sinnickson wrote me a letter expressive of great concern from my "way of living." I wrote her a letter that she will not forget soon. They cannot expect everyone to be satisfied to live in as small a circle as themselves in these days of great events. She expresses it as the great concern of the whole family and her approaching sickness made her bold to express it. . . .

from thy daughter
Cornelia Hancock

[May 1864]

Dear Ellen

... I am in Fredericksburg city. I do not know where Doctor is. On going ashore at Belle Plain we were met with hordes of wounded soldiers who had been able to walk from the Wilderness battlefield to this point. They were famished for food and as I opened the remains of my lunch basket the soldiers behaved more like ravenous wolves than human beings, so I felt the very first thing to be done was to prepare food in unlimited quantities, so with my past experience in arranging a fire where there seemed no possibility of one, I soon had a long pole hanging full of kettles of steaming hot coffee, and this, with soft bread, was dispensed all night to the tramping soldiers who were filling the steam boats on their return trip to Washington.

more concerned with my new work

. . . when daylight came Dr. Detmold and Dr. Vanderpool, two eminent surgeons of New York, and I boarded [an ambulance] to go to Fredericksburg, where our hospital is established. On arriving here the scenes beggared all description and these two men, eminent as they are in their profession, were paralyzed by what they saw. Rain had poured in through the bullet-riddled roofs of the churches until our wounded lay in pools of water made bloody by their seriously wounded condition. On these scenes Dr. Detmold and Dr. Vanderpool gazed in horror and seemed not to know where to take hold. My Gettysburg experience enabled me to take hold. The next morning these two surgeons came to me and said: "If we open another church under better conditions than these, will you accompany us?" and I said "Yes." After they got their nerve their splendid executive ability asserted itself and they had the pews knocked to pieces; under the backs and seats put a cleat and made little beds to raise the wounded from the floor. 'Tis true the beds have no springs, but it keeps them from lying in the water. Here day by day things are improving. An amputating table is improvised under a tree in the yard where these two good men work indefatigably.

[May 1864]

My Dear Mother

. . . I was the first and only Union woman in the city [Fredericksburg]. I believe today there were some of Miss Dix's nurses came thru. I have good quarters. We calculate there are 14,000 wounded in the town; the Secesh [rebel Southerners] help none, so you may know there is suffering equal to any thing anyone ever saw, almost as bad as Gettysburg, only we have houses and churches for the men. I am well, have worked harder than I ever did in my life. There was no food but hard tack to give the men so I turned in and dressed their wounds. It was all that could be done. I hear from my friends at the front one by one. Almost every one I knew was shot dead except the Doctor. Some of them are taken prisoners, Dr. Aiken for one. Dr. Dudley was safe last night. Lieut. Fogg was shot dead, so was Capt. Madison — this battle is still raging. I am glad I am here but I really thought my heart would break as one after another they told me was dead. If they only accomplish getting to Richmond. If not, it is a dear battle. There is very heavy firing today. I hope Dr. Dudley will get thru safe. He sent a Doctor to see me, told him he knew I would get thru. He is out on the front with his Regt. Oh, how awful, it seems as if the great judgment day was upon us now; the Secesh are still in town but we take possession of all churches and houses we want. I am well. Write to me in care of Dr. Davis, 1st Div. 2nd Corps. hosp., Fred'ksburg, Va. . . .

Thine in haste
Cornelia Hancock