

Excerpt from *A Guest of Mr. Lincoln: The Wartime Service of Sergeant Joseph W. Wheelless, Co. K, 32nd NC Infantry Regiment, Confederate States Army* by Colonel (Retired) Jayson A. Altieri, USA

The Confederate Ambulance Corps



Sometime during Sergeant Joseph W. Wheelless' return to the 32nd North Carolina (NC) in November 1862, possibly due in part to his war injury and also his experience as a wagoner, the regimental leadership under Colonel Edmund C. Brabble assigned Joseph as a Sergeant of [the] Ambulance Corps on 1 January 1863.¹ This posting was both a blessing and a curse in that it took Joseph off the front-lines of combat, but it also exposed him regularly to the horrific injuries experienced by soldiers in combat, as well as made him more vulnerable to the diseases associated with troops in the forward field hospitals and camps. Additionally, following a decisive battle and hasty retreat, wounded soldiers and their accompanying medical personnel were sometimes left behind in the confusion of battle, only to be captured by advancing enemy soldiers,

The road was full of ambulances, artillery wagons, and horses and the shells were falling among them as fast as you could count...crashing through them and sending them in every direction. — Private Lauren Gilbert, Ambulance Driver, 2nd Michigan Cavalry, First Battle of Manassas Junction, August 30, 1862.²

Over the course of the American Civil War, few changes in military policy were as dramatic as the evolution of the systems which removed wounded soldiers from the battlefield.³ While studies of the conflict often focus upon the movement of troops toward the front and how they were utilized when they arrived, examinations of the movement of those injured on the battle lines have received much less attention.⁴ When war broke out in early 1861, military authorities in both North and South were ill-



prepared for a large scale conflict.⁵ Little centralized preparation for massive casualties was undertaken – it was up to the medical personnel from individual regiments to prepare for the coming engagement.⁶ The Battles of Manassas Junction for the Federals, and Malvern Hill for the Confederates forced both sides to organize a more effective medical evacuation and treatment system for their combat casualties.

The Confederate Ambulance Corps concept, like its Federal counterpart, did not originate in North America. The idea of battlefield ambulances was initially developed by French Baron Jean Dominique Larrey, who served under Napoleon Bonaparte, in 1792.⁷ Baron Larrey helped create the French Army's *Service de Santé* (Medical Staff),

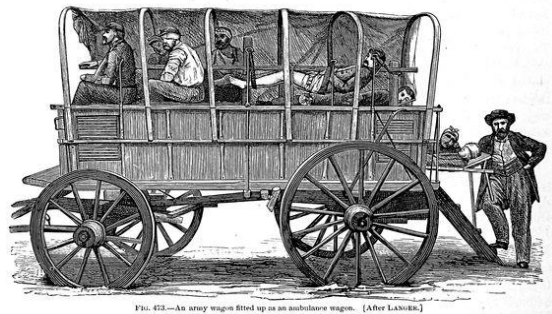
a system of *Triage* (prioritizing patients), and the use of light wagons to move the wounded quickly off the battle space called *Ambulance volante* (Flying Ambulance Corps), after seeing the casualties inflicted on armies during the early years of the Napoleonic Wars.⁸ Some 70 years later the Confederate and Federal governments, like the First French Empire's government, came to realize the survival of their wounded soldiers depended on the organizational abilities of their Army medical systems and a specialized corps of officers and soldiers.

Unlike the officers and NCOs in the Confederate Medical Department, who wore grey uniform with unique facings of the coat collar and cuffs and the stripe down the sides of the trousers that were black, the uniform for enlisted members in the Confederate Ambulance Corps would have been the standard issue state uniform or civilian-military mix.⁹ The distinguishing feature of the Confederate Ambulance Corps soldiers were the



red cloth armbands with the words "Ambulance Corps" stenciled in black on a white cloth square sewn directly to the armband.^{10 11} To aid in recognition to both friend and enemy of the non-combatant status of medical personnel and their staffs during the chaos in battle, the "Ambulance Corps" armbands (or a piece of paper with the same words written in block letters)

were occasionally worn around a hat.¹²



The ambulances themselves would have either been a two-wheeled or four-wheeled type wagons, some taken over from the Federal Army following the fall of Fort Sumter. The two-wheeled were either the *Finley* (named after Army Surgeon C. A. Finley) or *Coolidge* (Army Assistant Surgeon R. H. Coolidge) type wagons which were designed as a result of an October 1859 Board of U.S. Army Medical Officers convened to design new ambulances for the U.S. Army.¹³ The four-wheeled wagons type, the *Coolidge*, *Howard*, and *Rucker* types and also named after U.S. Army surgeons, had semi-elliptical steel springs or Indian rubber rings built under the litter beds to reduce the shock and jarring to the wounded soldiers during transport along unimproved roads and tracks.¹⁴ The Confederate government also built its own ambulances, which resembled the U.S. Army's Rucker type in many respects.¹⁵

The Confederate Ambulance Corps, in replicating their Federal counterparts, used the Army Corps as the unit of organization for the ambulance troops and equipment; and the latter would be organized upon the basis of the Captain as the commandant of the corps, one 1st Lieutenant for each division, one 2d Lieutenant for each brigade, one Sergeant for each regiment.¹⁶ The Privates of this corps usually consisted of two men and one driver to each ambulance, and one driver to each medicine wagon, although these numbers would vary given the Confederate Army's manpower shortages.¹⁷ Sergeant Wheelless' specific duties in the ambulance train would have, in accordance with the Medical Department policy, included,

[Conducting] the drills, inspections, etc., under the orders and supervision of the commander of the ambulances for a brigade, be particular in enforcing all orders he may receive from his superior officer, and that the men are attentive to their duties. The officers and non-commissioned officers will be mounted. The non-commissioned officers will be armed with revolvers.¹⁸

Given Joseph's previous experience with the 15th NC Regiment as both a soldier and wagoner, he was more than suited for the assignment before him. In particular, one task given Sergeant Wheelless' personal experiences after the Battle of Malvern Hill, would be vital,

The officers [and NCOs] of the ambulance corps will see that ambulances are not used for any other purposes than that for which they are designed, viz.: the transportation of sick and wounded, and in urgent cases only, for medical supplies. All officers are expressly forbidden to use them, or require them to be used, for any other purpose. When ambulances are required, for the transportation of sick or wounded at Division or Brigade Headquarters, they will be obtained, as they are needed for this purpose, from the Division train, but no ambulances belonging to this corps will be retained at such Headquarters.¹⁹

Unfortunately for Joseph and the rest of the Army of Northern Virginia Ambulance Corps, keeping nefarious officers from using the Ambulance Wagon as personal transports for their "bag and baggage," would be the least of their worries as the year 1863 began.

¹ "Confederate, 32nd North Carolina, Company K Muster Roll." The National Archives.

<https://www.fold3.com/image/35326852> (accessed February 1, 2020).

² Jake Wynn. "Evacuating the Wounded," *National Museum of Civil War Medicine*.

<http://www.civilwarmed.org/evacuation/> (accessed March 3, 2020).

³ Jake Wynn. "Evacuating the Wounded," *National Museum of Civil War Medicine*.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Richard A. Gabriel. *Between Flesh and Steel: A History of Military Medicine from the Middle Ages to the War in Afghanistan*. (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2013), 142.

⁸ Richard A. Gabriel. *Between Flesh and Steel: A History of Military Medicine from the Middle Ages to the War in Afghanistan*, 144.

⁹ Deering J. Roberts, "Organization of the Confederate Medical Department." *American Civil War Surgical Antiques*. July 3, 2019. http://www.medicalantiques.com/civilwar/Civil_War_Articles/Confederate_Army_Surgeons.htm (accessed March 30, 2020).

¹⁰ The Confederate Ambulance Corps armbands mirrored the red flags flown at hospitals and on ambulances v. the flags flown at Federal Hospitals that were yellow with a black "H" in the center and ambulance flags plain yellow. George B. Davis, Leslie J. Perry, and Joseph W. Kirkley. *The Official Military Atlas of the Civil War*. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1891-1895. Reprinted New York: Barnes and Noble, 2003), 397.

¹¹ The Regulations for the Army of the United States, 1861 and its revised edition of the same year, had specified that small red flags be used to mark the way to field hospitals once a battle had been conjoined. The paragraph (No. 717) establishing this system simply read: "The ambulance depot, to which the wounded are carried or directed for immediate treatment, is generally established at the most convenient building nearest the field of battle. A red flag marks its place, or the way to it, to the conductors of the ambulances and to the wounded who can walk." The Regulations for the Army of the Confederate States in its 1861 New Orleans edition published by Bloomfield & Steel, and in both the 1862 Richmond editions by J.W. Randolph and West & Johnston copied that exact same wording, respectively as paragraphs No. 714, 717, and 714. "Hospital and Ambulance Flags," *Confederate Flags*. <http://confederateflags.org/army/fotc2dary/#hospital> (accessed March 30, 2020); Editors. *Arms and Equipment of The Confederacy: Echoes of Glory*. (US: Time-Life Books, 1998), 127.

¹² Headquarters, [Federal] Army of the Potomac (Federal), General Order No. 85, stated the uniform for Federal soldiers was, "This corps will be designated for Sergeants, by a green band one and one-quarter inches broad around the cap, and chevrons of the same material, with the point toward the shoulder, on each arm above the elbow. For Privates, by a band the same as for Sergeants around the cap, and a half chevron of the same material on each arm above the elbow." "Ambulance Corps, Headquarters, Army of the Potomac, General Order No. 85," *Mutter Museum*. http://muttermuseum.org/static/media/uploads/civilwar_lp6_fnl.pdf (accessed March 30, 2020).

¹³ "Civil War Ambulance Wagons," *Civil War Medicine*, June 19, 2010.

<https://www.civilwarhome.com/ambulancewagons.html> (accessed March 31, 2020).

¹⁴ "Civil War Ambulance Wagons," *Civil War Medicine*, June 19, 2010.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ "Ambulance Corps, Headquarters, Army of the Potomac, General Order No. 85," *Mutter Museum*. http://muttermuseum.org/static/media/uploads/civilwar_lp6_fnl.pdf (accessed March 30, 2020).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*