

# The Civil War Ambulance Wagon

*James H. Hillestad, Member No. 6, chronicles the state of medical transport during the Civil War.*

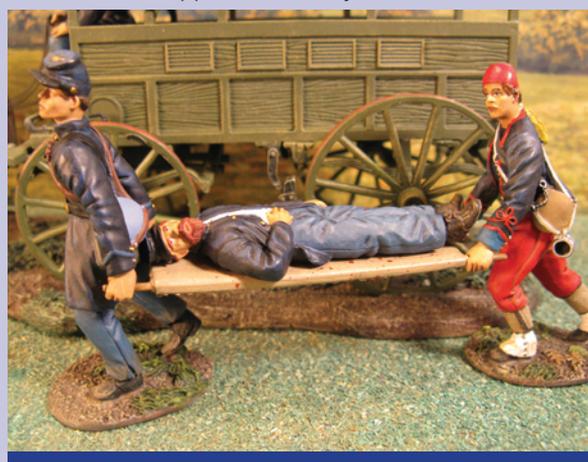


LEFT  
Zouave ambulance crew demonstrating the removal of wounded soldiers from the field. (Library of Congress)

**T**he Union Army entered the war totally unprepared. The Medical Department chief was Thomas Lawson, a veteran of the War of 1812, more than 80 years old and dying of cancer. Lawson continuously pared the department, cutting its budget and making available only the barest of supplies. Only a minimum inventory was kept of medicine, bandages and medical tools. For example, although the clinical thermometer was introduced in the 17th century, fewer than 20 were available to the Union Army in 1861.

Lawson died only weeks after the fall of Fort Sumter. He was replaced by Clement A. Finlay, who had served in the army since 1818, and who shared Lawson's parsimonious values.

At the outbreak of hostilities, the United States Army medical staff consisted of the surgeon general (Lawson), 30 surgeons and 83 assistant surgeons. Of these, 24 resigned to "go South" and three others were dropped for "disloyal-



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Union Stretcher Bearer Set, No.31053



ty." Thus, the medical corps began its war service with only 87 men.

Coming to the rescue was the United States Sanitary Commission, which had been inspired in part by the efforts of Florence Nightingale, who worked to alleviate the deplorable conditions of British Crimean War casualties. The "Sanitary," as it came to be called, was a fusion of local soldiers' aid societies. Women took the lead in forming these associations, sending bandages, medicine, clothing, food and volunteer nurses to Army camps and hospitals.

This work ran contrary to the dictates of Surgeon General Finlay -- who disdained outside interference. The famous landscape architect Frederick Olmsted served as secretary of the Sanitary Commission, and he candidly took issue with Finlay, saying, "It is a criminal weakness to entrust such responsibilities as those resting on the