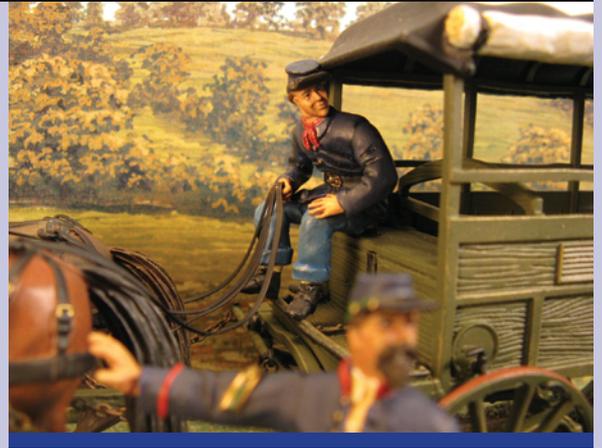


that could carry a sick person in a lying position? Why, the undertaker, of course!

Prior to the battle of Antietam (September, 1862), ambulance wagons were staffed by bandsmen, who ferried the wounded to hospitals. Frequently, the most unfit soldiers were detailed, and in the first year of the war, they were known to get drunk on medicinal liquor and ignore their wounded charges in order to hide themselves from enemy fire.

A new system was put in place by the Army of the Potomac Medical Director Jonathan Letterman. Referred to as the Letterman Ambulance Plan, the ambulances of a division moved together, supervised by a mounted line sergeant, with one driver per vehicle along with two stretcher-bearers.

Wounded men were evacuated from the front line by the stretcher-bearers. The more severely wounded were placed in ambulances; the most common type was drawn by two horses.



ABOVE
Union Rucker Ambulance Wagon detail, No.31052



LEFT
Armory Square Hospital, Ward K, 1864, Washington, D.C. (Library of Congress)

This ambulance was a stout spring wagon, covered with a canvas top and rolled canvas sides.

Numerous versions of ambulance wagons were used. The most serviceable was designed by Brig. Gen. D.H. Rucker, and was made in government repair shops in Washington. The W. Britain model was inspired by the Rucker Ambulance Wagon.

The new system for transporting the wounded quickly proved its worth and spread to other Union Armies. Wearing special uniforms and imbued with high morale, these non-combatant medics risked their lives to reach the wounded in the midst of battle, and evacuate them as quickly as possible to field hospitals. The ambulance corps became a model for European armies in the Franco-Prussian War.

At the Battle of Gettysburg, in those chaotic days of early July, 1863, approximately 1,000 ambulance wagons evacuated more than 20,000 Union and Confederate casualties. 📄

Did you know...?

- Notable medical volunteers included the writers Louisa May Alcott and Walt Whitman. Clara Barton worked on her own as a one-woman aid society, which led to her role in establishing the American Red Cross.

- The legendary General Stonewall Jackson, wounded by his own men at Chancellorsville, was placed in a field ambulance wagon and taken to the corps field infirmary at the Wilderness Tavern, and thence to Chandler's Plantation, where he died.

- "The man of the hour," Gen. Winfield Hancock, was dispatched by Gen. George Meade to take command of the left wing of the Union Army at Gettysburg. Hancock received his orders at Taneytown and set off with aides and signalmen in an ambulance wagon, where they studied maps relating to the situation ahead as they bumped along.

Jim Hillestad operates under the name The Toy Soldier Museum. His museum, containing more than 35,000 figures and a large collection of militaria, is located in the Pocono Mountains of north-eastern Pennsylvania. For directions and hours, call him at 570/629-7227, or visit his Web site www.the-toy-soldier.com