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Richard D. Dunphy: Under the Knife

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Richard D. Dunphy: Under the Knife

Abstract

Within four hours of Richard Dunphy's grievous wounding at the Battle of Mobile Bay, both of his arms had been amputated. In a medical survey, he described the "extraordinary pain" that lasted "for about three weeks." There was "a great quantity of pus, and twelve pieces of bone or splinters came out" from the wound for months after the surgery. Though the pain was great, it faded in time. The psychological and social effects of the operation, however, never went away. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, Richard Dunphy, pensions, Union veterans, Battle of Mobile Bay, amputations, Civil War medicine, Civil War hospitals

Disciplines

History | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Military History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Richard D. Dunphy: Under the Knife

DECEMBER 5, 2013

By: Kevin Lavery, '16

Within four hours of Richard Dunphy's grievous wounding at the Battle of Mobile Bay, both of his arms had been amputated. In a medical survey, he described the "extraordinary pain" that lasted "for about three weeks." There was "a great quantity of pus, and twelve pieces of bone or splinters came out" from the wound for months after the surgery. Though the pain was great, it faded in time. The psychological and social effects of the operation, however, never went away.

Despite the traditional perception of Civil War surgeons as poorly trained butchers whose first instinct was to hack off any wounded limb, the truth is far more complicated. Trammel reminds us that although "these surgeries [were] rushed [and] many doctors were ill-prepared to perform them . . . Union statistics confirmed that immediate surgery resulted in higher survival rates" because it precluded deadly infections. The wounds being amputated were serious. Rusty shrapnel and poor sanitary conditions inevitably led to infections that could not at that time be treated with more subtle means. Even though surgery during this era was by no means sanitary, it was still safer than letting a wound fester. Amputation saved lives, though in the process, sometimes destroyed them later on.

During Dunphy's surgery, his right and left arms were amputated seven and eight inches from the shoulder respectively. Mercifully, the surgeons used chloroform to anesthetize him during the gruesome process, a grace not given to all amputees. After the surgery, he had "trouble for two days with [his] urinal organs." The "burning sensation of the nerves" lasted three weeks. For about six months after the surgery, he could still feel the missing appendages.

Only one year after the war ended, Dunphy began experimenting with early prosthetics that had been developed in response to the Civil War's unprecedented number of amputees. One set even allowed him to write and eat without assistance, a gift of independence which must have been greatly appreciated by the double-amputee. He was most pleased with how warm they kept his stumps during the winter months. Despite this, the heavy prosthetics caused him fatigue and he did not frequently use them even though they were provided at the government's expense.

Amputation saved Dunphy's life, but it filled that same life with difficulties and struggles. He faced both discrimination and support from his Vallejo community. When he was turned down for a job at Mare Island, a local newspaper railed against the injustice. The paper points out that he was qualified for the job and argues that he was being discriminated against, if not for reason of his arms, then based on "the fact that he fought for the Union – a crime under this administration." This bit of community drama – and the dangerous accusation – was just enough to get him the job.

Although his response to John Mitchell's medical survey claims that there had been no impact on his general health, doctors believed as early as 1874 that "his mind was affected on account of his arms." There is only so much that a person can handle before being forever affected negatively by the experience. Though they did not know it at the time, Dunphy may have been suffering a form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, a condition that would forever impact his relationships and ability to function in society.

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