



4-20-2018

James Bedell: The Inhumanity of War

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Tracey, Jonathan, "James Bedell: The Inhumanity of War" (2018). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 285.
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James Bedell: The Inhumanity of War

Abstract

This semester, I am continuing to work on the Killed at Gettysburg digital history project. This time, I selected James T. Bedell, Private in Company F of the 7th Michigan Cavalry. I was introduced to his story while transcribing Henry Janes' Case Book for Gettysburg National Military Park as a part of my work study program. Henry Janes was the doctor in charge of Camp Letterman, and after the war he compiled the bed cards of many soldiers treated at the hospital, creating his Case Book. Bedell's record on a page entitled "Skull, Fractures of, with Injury of the Brain" was one of the first cases I transcribed back in September 2017, meaning that my year at Gettysburg will conclude with a nice tie back to the beginning. However, Bedell's story became incredibly personal to me and shows just how inhumane the American Civil War really was. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

7th Michigan Cavalry, Army Medical Museum, Camp Letterman, Cavalry

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

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This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

James Bedell: The Inhumanity of War

By [Jonathan Tracey '19](#)

This semester, I am continuing to work on the Killed at Gettysburg digital history project. This time, I selected James T. Bedell, Private in Company F of the 7th Michigan Cavalry. I was introduced to his story while transcribing Henry Janes' Case Book for Gettysburg National Military Park as a part of my work study program. Henry Janes was the doctor in charge of Camp Letterman, and after the war he compiled the bed cards of many soldiers treated at the hospital, creating his Case Book. Bedell's record on a page entitled "Skull, Fractures of, with Injury of the Brain" was one of the first cases I transcribed back in September 2017, meaning that my year at Gettysburg will conclude with a nice tie back to the beginning. However, Bedell's story became incredibly personal to me and shows just how inhumane the American Civil War really was.



Camp Letterman. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

Enlisting on January 1st, 1863, Bedell was thrust into the world of a cavalryman. As a farmer, he may have had experience with horses, explaining why he didn't go into an infantry regiment. Winter was filled with training, and spring was composed of light guard duty and a handful of small skirmishes. Gettysburg would be Bedell's first and final major battle. On July 3rd, the Michigan Brigade was deployed east of town on what is now called the East Cavalry Battlefield. While Pickett's Charge assailed the front of the Union lines, Confederate cavalry clashed with Union troopers in the rear. The untested 7th Michigan Cavalry, led by George Armstrong Custer, was sent to charge Confederate troops to prevent them gaining momentum for a charge of their own. It was a disaster. The regiment charged directly into a fence and became disorganized. During this chaos, Bedell's horse was shot out from under him, and he was unable to withdraw with the rest of his unit. Uninjured, though likely disoriented, he was captured and led to the rear. The Confederate officer leading the column of prisoners was furious at Bedell for not keeping pace. He struck Bedell with his saber and left him beside the road to die.

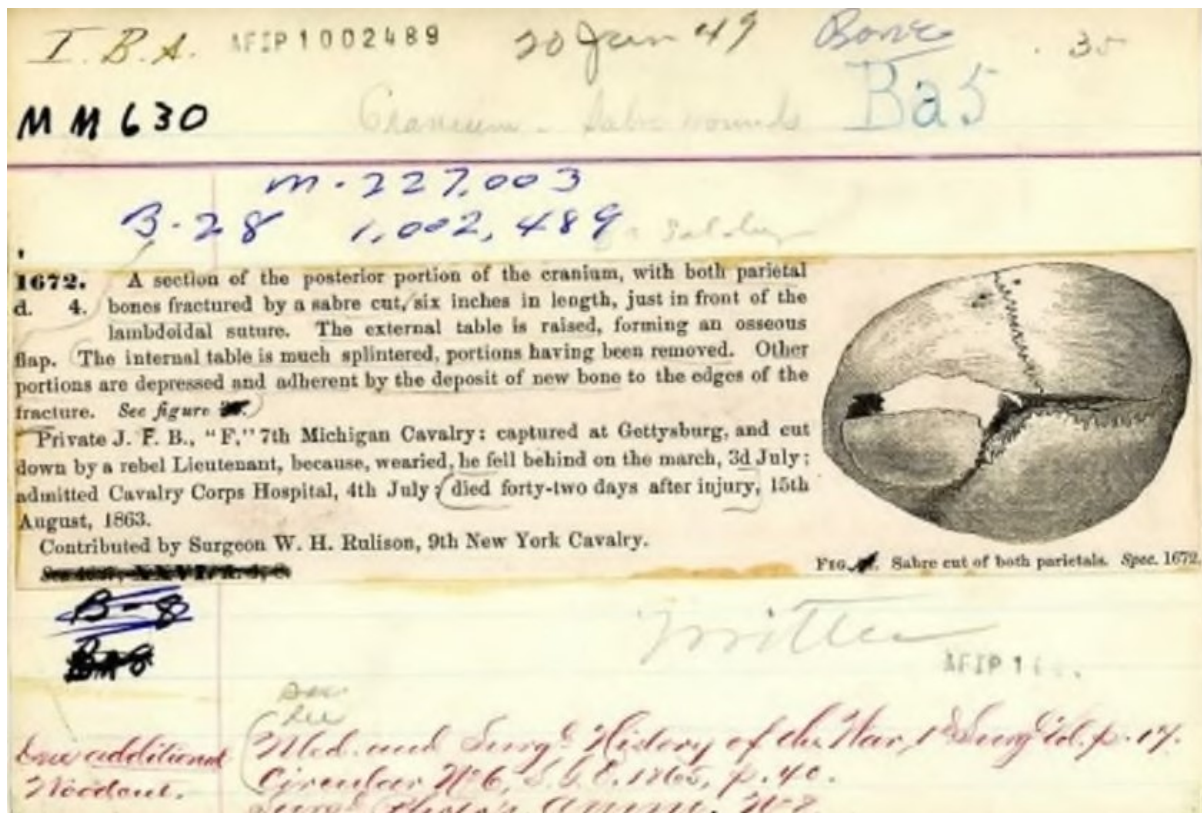


Photo credit: National Museum of Health and Medicine

Bedell was brought to the Cavalry Corps Hospital and ultimately to Camp Letterman. There, his wound was described as "on the left side of the cranium by a sabre stroke crushing the skull from a point one inch above the lambdoidal suture extending anteriorly nearly 4 inches on a line parallel to the saggital suture." The saber had opened his skull, and he was weak with a slow pulse. He was completely lucid, and when roused from his depressed state was able to communicate effectively. He survived in this state until August 30th, when his pulse suddenly increased, and he suffered from a severe chill.

This increased stress led to the brain protruding from the wound, and he went blind. Throughout all this his mind remained clear for hours until he finally died.

On May 21, 1862, Surgeon General William Hammond had issued Circular No. 2. This order instructed medical officers to “collect and to forward to the office of the Surgeon General, all specimens of morbid anatomy, surgical and medical, with may be regarded as valuable.” It also established the Army Medical Museum as a repository for these unusual cases. Hammond hoped to use the war as a way to further medical knowledge and believed that gathering battlefield specimens in this new museum would allow them to be studied in more depth. James T. Bedell’s wound was considered one of these valuable specimens. Saber wounds were rare, and doctors were undoubtedly curious as to how he had survived for nearly two months. Following his death, his skull was removed from his body. It was shipped to the Army Medical Museum where photographs were taken, and the remainder of his body was laid to rest in the National Cemetery in Gettysburg. It is highly unlikely that his family was ever asked for consent. These images accompanied with his medical history would be published in medical journals through the 1870s.



Photo credit to the author.

The sheer inhumanity with which Bedell was treated in both life and death shocked me. A Confederate officer struck down a prisoner of war, utterly shattering the 19th century bonds of masculine honor. Bedell was left for dead and brought to a hospital, where he clung to life for nearly two months experiencing extreme discomfort. Following his death, he still was not treated as a human being. He was given a named place in the National Cemetery, a place of honor. However, Bedell's skull does not read beneath that stone with the rest of his body. Instead, it still sits in the National Museum of Medicine in Silver Spring, Maryland. Treated poorly in both life and death, I can only hope that my telling of his story returns some level of humanity to a man regarded only as interesting for medical science.

Sources

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