

# Jonathan Letterman

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## *Excerpt:*

In March the Army of the Potomac finally began its long-awaited campaign aimed at the Confederate capital in Richmond. General McClellan's vision was a grand one: assemble the largest army in the history of the United States. Flank the Confederate troops threatening Washington, D.C., by making an unprecedented amphibious landing at Fort Monroe on the southeastern tip of the Virginia peninsula, followed by a fifty-mile overland campaign across the peninsula west to capture Richmond. To the sound of blaring bugles and bands, ships departed Washington, D.C. filled with men, destined for a large meadow at Fort Monroe. Hundreds of barges were moored there along the shore as tons of ordnance, supplies, and materiel were unloaded and stacked in massive piles while temporary shelters were carved out of the forest. In about a month, an estimated one hundred thousand Union soldiers had been crammed into the temporary military camp.



Disease surely followed. Tripler discovered rampant scurvy among some units whose soldiers refused to eat the nearly inedible desiccated vegetables. Hygiene in a temporary camp built in swampy spring mud was deplorable. As McClellan's army assembled in Virginia, Tripler thought it was inevitable that he would be faced with fifty thousand cases of diarrhea. He also desperately sought 250 four-wheeled ambulances prior to the start of battle, but received only one hundred seventy-seven. It took nearly a month before McClellan had marshaled his troops and supplies and was ready to march toward Yorktown, about twenty miles away. The Rebels knew he was coming.

The Confederates established three lines of defense, stretching north to south from the York River on the north down to the James River that formed the southern border of the peninsula. As McClellan's army finally moved west, it encountered the Rebel's first line of defense at Yorktown. Artful tactics by the Confederates stalled McClellan's poorly disciplined troops. Badly outnumbered the Confederates had confounded McClellan by painting logs to look like cannon and to act as though their military force was far greater than it was. His attack on Yorktown turned into a siege that lasted nearly a month before the Rebels withdrew to the west.

Spring rains soaked Union soldiers who carried too much gear on the march and were forced to sleep in the open. Roads became mud quagmires that bogged down the army's advance. Soon "Chickahominy Fever" took hold. So many soldiers fell sick that Tripler decided to evacuate them to Washington, D.C., Annapolis and Baltimore. When malingers swamped patient boats headed north, Tripler reversed course and kept his thousands of patients on the peninsula, despite a critical shortage of medical tents.



As McClellan's army slogged westward across the Virginia peninsula in May, Surgeon General Hammond had already become testy with Tripler's pleas for more supplies. On April 14 during the Yorktown siege Tripler had complained to Hammond's predecessor that his medical supplies were nearly exhausted. He renewed his complaint to Hammond on May 18 after he discovered medical supply delivery was being delayed. In telegrams he pleaded his case for supplies again on May 20 and May 29, begging for more quinine after receiving only one hundred ounces instead of the two thousand he had requested. Hammond's reply to Tripler had been to stop complaining and take command of the local situation as Tripler had the authority to do so. Two days following Tripler's latest plea, the Rebels attacked McClellan's forces at Seven Pines in hopes of avoiding a siege of Richmond.

Feints, counter assaults, and flank attacks by the Rebels stopped the Union advance. After two days' fighting, Tripler was faced with nearly three thousand six hundred wounded soldiers. Their treatment raised a public outcry. The shorthanded medical department required more than a week to transport all the wounded to nearby ports where hospital ships awaited. The smell of putrid flesh announced the arrival of boxcars filled with wounded at White House on the James River.

Sanitary Commission observers were appalled at the plight of the wounded four days after the end of fighting. "Some (wounded) were just as they had been left by the fortune of war; their wounds, as yet, undressed, smeared with filth and blood, and all their wants unsupplied. Others had had their wounds dressed, one, two, or three days before. Others, still, were under the surgeon's hands, receiving such care as could be given them by men overburdened by the number of their patients, worn out by excessive and long-continued labor. . ." they wrote. Many of those patients ultimately arrived in Washington, D.C. on barges and ships that lacked food, water, and sanitation facilities. Some had lain in the early-summer sun for days, suffering at the

hands of their army that still did not have an organized battlefield care and evacuation system in place.

Shaken by damage inflicted by the Rebels, McClellan halted his assault for more than three weeks to draw reinforcements and supplies. The delay gave Confederate General Robert Lee valuable time to strengthen Richmond's defenses and construct a line of defense that stretched thirty miles across McClellan's path. Fearful of a Richmond siege by the Army of the Potomac, Lee took the initiative with attacks on June 25, which became the start of the Seven Days Battle. McClellan had lost the initiative and relentless attacks by Lee broke the Union army's spirit, forcing McClellan to order withdrawal to the James River, about thirty miles southeast of Richmond.

Six major engagements in seven days produced more than eight thousand wounded men. Although the army was never overly extended, railroads were available, and the Union Navy controlled waterways, McClellan's medical department had been overwhelmed by the flood of the wounded and dying almost from the outset of the Peninsula Campaign. Although Tripler never received the logistical support he believed was necessary, public outrage at the plight of the wounded destroyed any credibility he had held with Surgeon General Hammond and the Sanitary Commission.

Tripler had already been replaced by Hammond before the Seven Days Battle took place. On June 19 Tripler had conceded professional defeat when he asked for reassignment to Detroit Barracks, Michigan, a post where he had served prior to the war. Hammond approved the request and on the same day appointed a man he knew and trusted, Jonathan Letterman, as the new medical director of the Army of the Potomac. Letterman also was promoted to surgeon with a military rank of major.

Four days later Letterman arrived at Harrison's Landing, surveyed the carnage, and met with McClellan who later recorded his first impression of Letterman, writing "I saw immediately that Letterman was the man for the occasion, and at once gave him my unbounded confidence. In our long and frequent interviews upon the subject of his duties, I was most strongly impressed by his accurate knowledge of his work—the clear and perfectly practical nature of his views and the thorough unselfishness of his character. He had but one thing in view—the best possible organization of his Department—and that, not that he might gain credit or promotion by the results of his work, but that he might do all in his power to diminish the inevitable sufferings of the soldiers and increase the efficiency of the Army . . . I never met with his superior in power of organization and executive ability."

The thousands of men who had fallen wounded across the eastern Virginia desperately needed Letterman's skills.