

# Death, Disease, and Life at War: The Civil War Letters of Surgeon James D. Benton, 111th and 98th New York Infantry Regiments, 1862-1865

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## Review

**D'Onofrio, Peter J.**

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**Loperfido, Christopher E.** *Death, Disease, and Life War: The Civil War Letters of Surgeon James D. Benton, 111th and 98th New York Infantry Regiments, 1862-1865.* Savas Beatie \$16.95 ISBN 9781611213591

Union surgeon James Dana Benton witnessed firsthand the suffering and death brought about by the ghastly wounds, infections, and diseases that wreaked havoc on both Union and Confederate soldiers. A native of New York, Dr. Benton penned a series of letters throughout the war to his wife and family relating his experiences with the 111th New York Infantry as an assistant surgeon, and later with the 98th New York as surgeon. Dr. Benton was present for some of the war's most gruesome and important battles, including Gettysburg, Cold Harbor, and the siege of Petersburg. He was also present for the fall of Harpers Ferry, Abraham Lincoln's second Inaugural address, and the collapse of Richmond, where he took up residence in a hotel.

This correspondence, unique in its content, covers a variety of topics beyond medicine and the treatment of the injured. Dr. Benton talks about the weather, the food, lateness of pay which affected his life in the Army. His pen offers an insightful and honest look into the everyday life of not only a Union surgeon, but an officer who suffered the same basic hardships other soldiers in the ranks endured.

With more than 750,000 casualties during the Civil War, prompt and timely attention from an army surgeon was often the difference between life and death. Dr. Benson's letters home provide us with a compelling glimpse into the everyday life of these doctors, their concerns and frustrations, their patients and colleagues, the places visited, and their opinions on the war.

The author's Preface is a short narrative, four pages, on how the armies of the Civil War were organized. In his introduction, Mr. Loperfido gives an overview of the literature about the war and describes the medical situation in the army at the beginning of the Civil War. The last four pages of the Introduction is a biographical sketch of Dr. Benton.

A series of five appendices offers additional information to the reader. Meg Groeling's "Dr. Jonathan Letterman: Architect of Battlefield Triage" discusses Letterman's improvements in evacuating the wounded from the battlefield and his ongoing revisions to the system. As Major General Paul R. Hawley, chief surgeon, European Theater of Operations stated on page 107, "There was not a day during WWII that I did not thank God for Jonathan Letterman. He was truly a surgeon for the soldiers." The second appendix, also written by Meg Groeling, entitled "The U.S. Sanitary Commission During the War," gives a brief history of the work of the USSC. "The Development of the Ambulance Corps," by Dr. Dennis Rasbach, discusses such topics as the

transportation of the wounded using litters, ambulance wagons, hospital trains and hospital ships. “Amputations in the Civil War,” also penned by Dr. Rasbach, presents the types of amputations used during the Civil War, the instruments and techniques used, and the outcomes among other sub-topics. Finally, Civil War Dressings Lint educates the reader on one type of dressing used by the surgeons of the period. This last appendix was also written by Dr. Dennis Rasbach. The author provides a good list of his sources for those wishing to delve into this subject further. Additionally, the writers of the appendices also provided either footnotes or a select bibliography for each of the contributions. Taken together, Loperfido’s thorough analysis and the detailed appendices provide useful information for specialists and newcomers alike.

### **About the Author**

Christopher E. Loperfido has a bachelor’s degree in history and political science. He worked for the National Park Service at Gettysburg National Military Park as a Park Service Ranger. Currently employed by the Department of Homeland Security, he lives in Washington State with his wife and son. *Death, Disease, and Life at War* is his first book.

*Peter J. D’Onofrio received his Ph.D. in American History from LaSalle University. He is the president of The Society of Civil War Surgeons and the editor of The Journal of Civil War Medicine. He can be reached at pjdscws@gmail.com.*