

Civil War casualties

BY DAVID WALBERT



Figure 1. At Cold Harbor, Virginia, African American men gather up the bones of soldiers killed in battle.

In all, historians estimate that about 620,000 Americans died in the Civil War. That's almost as many as have died in *all other U.S. wars combined*:

Deaths in U.S. Wars¹

War	Dates	U.S. deaths
Revolution	1775–1783	4,000
War of 1812	1812–1815	2,000
Mexican-American War	1846–1848	13,000
Civil War	1861–1865	618,000
Spanish-American War	1898	2,000
World War I	1917–1918	112,000
World War II	1941–1945	405,000
Korean War	1950–1953	54,000
Vietnam War	1959–1975	58,000
Persian Gulf War	1991	300
Afghanistan War	2001–	600 (a)
Iraq War	2003–	4,300 (b)

(a) as of April 2009. (b) as of May 2009.

The numbers are especially shocking when you remember that the population of the United States in 1860 was only 31,443,321 — which means that nearly *two percent* of the U.S. population died in the Civil War.

Both sides in the conflict lost about the same fraction of their troops — 23 or 24 percent — so one soldier in four died.

Civil War Casualties²

	Union	Confederacy	Total
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Deaths			
Death from wounds	110,070	94,000	204,070
Death from disease	249,458	164,000	413,458
Total deaths	359,528	258,000	617,528
Total death rate	23%	24%	23%
Wounded			
Wounded	275,175	~100,000	~375,000
All casualties			
Totals	634,703	~358,000	~992,703

Individual battles



Figure 2. An ambulance crew loads soldiers into a horse-drawn ambulance.

The following table lists battles with more than 20,000 casualties. Here, “casualties” includes killed, wounded, captured, and missing. Note that estimates of casualties vary — often widely — and we’ve tried to give the most commonly cited numbers or ranges, rounded off for simplicity.

Regardless of the detail, the scale of the carnage is simply incredible. As many Americans died in a single day at Antietam as died in the entire War for Independence. In the Normandy Landings on “D-Day,” June 6, 1944 — the most famous battle of World War II — the U.S. suffered 6,600 casualties, yet that number pales in comparison with the deaths at Gettysburg.

Bloodiest battles of the Civil War ³								
Battle	Dates	Union			Confederate			Total casualties
		Forces	Casualties	Percent	Forces	Casualties	Percent	
Gettysburg	July 1–3, 1863	94,000	23,000	24%	72,000	23,000	30%	46,000

Chickamauga	Sept. 19–20, 1863	60,000	16,000	27%	65,000	18,500	28%	34,500
Chancellorsville	May 1–4, 1863	134,000	17,000	13%	61,000	13,000	21%	30,000
Spotsylvania Court House	May 8–19, 1864	100,000	18,000	18%	52,000	12,000	23%	30,000
The Wilderness	May 5–7, 1862	102,000	18,500	18%	61,000	7,500–11,500	12–19%	26,000–30,000
Second Bull Run (Second Manassas)	August 28–30, 1862	62,000	14,500	23%	50,000	9,500	19%	24,000
Antietam	Sept. 17, 1862	87,000	12,500	14%	45,000	10,500	23%	23,000
Stones River	Dec. 31, 1862–Jan. 2, 1863	43,500	13,000	30%	38,000	10,000	26%	23,000
Shiloh	April 6–7, 1862	67,000	13,000	19%	44,500	10,500	24%	23,500

The reasons

There were several reasons for the huge numbers of casualties in the Civil War. They had to do not only with the way battles were fought, but with what happened to soldiers afterward.

TECHNOLOGY

Military technology improved tremendously in the middle of the nineteenth century. In particular, new guns could be loaded faster or fire multiple rounds without being reloaded. The first revolver was invented in 1836, and breech-loading rifles could be loaded from the back, letting a soldier fire more rounds per minute. (Compare this to what a Revolutionary soldier had to do⁴.)

The minie ball made infantry fighting especially deadly. A rifled barrel spins the bullet and thus makes it fly straighter — think of the spiral on a football — but older rifles had to be loaded by slowly stuffing the bullet through the grooves of the barrel, which was not practical for someone in the heat of battle. The minie ball was smaller than the diameter of the barrel, and so a soldier could load his rifle simply by dropping the minie ball down the barrel. When the rifle was fired, the powder in the cartridge burned, producing hot gas that caused the minie ball to expand and fill the barrel. The grooves in the base of the ball then fit into the grooves of the barrel.

The combination of speed and accuracy meant that infantry fighting was deadlier than ever before. A competent marksman could hit his target from 200 yards away, and the minie ball traveled fast enough to shatter bone on impact. The balls were also soft, not hard-jacketed, and so they spread on impact, making a larger hole and causing more damage and bleeding.

STRATEGY

The rifle and minie ball gave a new advantage to the defense in a battle. Older muskets — without rifling — had a much smaller range, and allowed soldiers to get close enough together to fight hand to hand, with bayonets. In the Civil War, armies engaged each other at greater distances. Artillery also became less important, because cannon crews could be picked off by distant marksmen. As a result, an army with a good position could simply mow down enemy soldiers making a frontal assault.

Yet most generals in the Civil War clung to older theories of warfare that valued offense rather than defense — in part because that was what they had learned at West Point, and in part because their sense of honor demanded a willingness to fight. But frontal assaults, however heroic they might sound in books, were suicidal now. In Pickett's Charge at the Battle of Gettysburg, almost 6,000 Confederate soldiers were killed or wounded as they advanced uphill over a mile of open ground toward entrenched Union positions.

DISEASE

If you look at the table above, you'll see that twice as many men died of disease as were killed in battle. So many men living in close quarters, under great stress and often with poor nutrition, were subject to epidemics. Diseases such as measles, mumps, and whooping cough swept through the camps. Near swamps, mosquitoes brought malaria. And already-weakened soldiers who caught a common cold often developed pneumonia.

But the biggest cause of disease was a lack of sanitation. Open latrines, decomposing food, and manure attracted disease-carrying insects and contaminated drinking water. The Union army reported that more than 995 out of every 1,000 men contracted chronic

diarrhea or dysentery during the war. Typhoid fever, caused by salmonella bacteria in food and water, was responsible for as many as a quarter of all non-combat casualties in the Confederate army.

Disease was, sadly, an expected part of war in the nineteenth century. Not until World War II would the U.S. fight a war in which more soldiers died of battle wounds than of disease.

MEDICINE

Not only were the causes of disease still poorly understood in the 1860s, but by today's standards, army surgeons — military doctors were all called “surgeons” — were not skilled at treating disease or at repairing wounds. They operated in conditions we would find primitive, with no antibiotics, no painkillers, and no means of sanitizing surgical tools. Since the germ theory of disease (that disease and infection are caused by microorganisms) hadn't yet been developed and accepted, doctors wouldn't have sterilized their tools in any case.

Of all the wounds soldiers received to their arms and legs, about one in six could not be repaired and resulted in amputation. Amputation could lead to gangrene, in which the flesh rots from lack of blood flow, or to various kinds of infections. Despite these dangers, three-fourths of amputees survived. Given the constraints of the time, army surgeons did well to save as many lives as they did.

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Notes

1. Source: Digital History (see <http://www.learnnc.orghttp://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/historyonline/us20.cfm>) and U.S. Department of Defense figures. (a) as of April 2009. (b) as of May 2009. Wikipedia (see http://www.learnnc.orghttp://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Civil_War_casualties) has a more complete list of U.S. wars and casualties.
2. Source: Digital History (see <http://www.learnnc.orghttp://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/historyonline/us20.cfm>).
3. Data drawn from various sources. Wikipedia probably has the best overview of various casualty estimates.
4. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-revolution/4989>.

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