

# Doctor's Orders – Jonathan Letterman

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<b>SUBJECT</b>	<b>TEACHER</b>	<b>GRADE</b>	<b>DATE</b>
American Studies Unit: Civil War Lesson: Jonathan Letterman	NMCWM Rachel Moses	04/08	Drafted: 5/11/2020

## **TIME REQUIRED**

30/45 Minutes

## **OVERVIEW**

While he may not have been a general, Jonathan Letterman changed the course of the Civil War and of American medicine. His innovation and retooling of the Union Army's Medical Corps during the chaotic battles of 1862 made him a hero of Civil War medicine. Jonathan Letterman became the Medical Director of the Army of the Potomac on July 4, 1862. By this time, the Civil War had been raging for more than a year and the Medical Corps was in disarray. Previous Medical Directors had largely failed in their duty to adequately care for the sick and wounded on the battlefield. At the Battle of First Bull Run in July 1861, many wounded were left on the battlefield to suffer for days in the hot sun. The ambulance system of the United States Army had failed them.

Letterman arrived at a crucial time; by the end of August, the Union army was on the retreat again from Bull Run. General Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia began crossing the river into Union-controlled Maryland. The stage was set for the biggest challenge of Jonathan Letterman's life. His reorganization of the Ambulance Corps, field hospitals, and development of a tiered system of care on the battlefield forever changed how the wounded were evacuated and treated. As a testament to this, following the Battle of Antietam on September 17, 1862, over 10,000 wounded were evacuated off the battlefield within 24 hours, an incredible feat considering the department's previous performance.

Letterman would continue to reorganize the Army's system of trauma care, dedicated to improving the treatment and chance of survival of wounded warriors. These changes, ordered in October 1862, are known as The Letterman Plan. Letterman resigned from his position as Medical Director in January 1864. His "plan" lived on, however, as law. In March 1864, the U.S. Congress implemented Letterman's changes across the entire U.S. Army. They remain today, a basis for our modern EMS system and combat medicine.

This activity is designed to introduce students to Jonathan Letterman and his impact on medical care during the Civil War and today.

PHASES	4 <sup>TH</sup> GRADE	SECONDARY
CURRICULAR STANDARDS	SS.400.50.03.c Analyze regional differences in the Civil War and its effects on people in Maryland.	SS.AS1.80.01 Identify and explain the impact of key events & figures of the Civil War.  SS.AS1.80.05 Explain how the Civil War caused technological change and medical advancements in America.
OBJECTIVE(S)	Students will be able to identify and explain who Jonathan Letterman was and what changes he made during the Civil War that still impact us today.	Students will be able to identify and explain the revolutionary changes made by Jonathan Letterman during the Civil War and their impact on current emergency and combat medicine.
INFORMATION REQUIRED	Jonathan Letterman First Battle of Bull Run Ambulance Corps Battle of Antietam Triage Letterman Plan	Jonathan Letterman First Battle of Bull Run Ambulance Corps Maryland Campaign Battle of Antietam Triage Letterman Plan
ACTIVITY	<p><b>Engage:</b> We often think of the Civil War in terms of soldiers and generals, but doctors played a vital role as well. What impact do you think doctors had on the battlefield?</p> <p><b>Explore: Read Worksheet Appendix A</b></p> <p><b>Explain:</b> Why was Letterman’s system of evacuation so revolutionary for the time? What ways do you think it impacted soldiers the most? How does his system compare to the system used before his arrival</p>	<p><b>Engage:</b> We often think of the Civil War in terms of soldiers and generals, but surgeons played a vital role as well. What impact could surgeons have had on the battlefield?</p> <p><b>Explore: Read Worksheet Appendix B</b></p> <p><b>Explain:</b> Why was Letterman’s system of evacuation so revolutionary for the time? What ways do you think it impacted soldiers the most? How does his system compare</p>

PHASES	4 <sup>TH</sup> GRADE	SECONDARY
	<p>as medical director? How does Letterman’s system impact us today?</p> <p><b>Elaborate:</b> Imagine you are a soldier or a doctor in the military today. Write a letter or journal entry after a battle and describe how Jonathan Letterman’s system of evacuation impacted how the wounded were removed from the battlefield.</p>	<p>to the system used before his arrival as medical director? How does Letterman’s system impact us today?</p> <p><b>Elaborate:</b> Imagine you are a soldier or a doctor in the military today. Write a letter or journal entry after a battle and describe how Jonathan Letterman’s system of evacuation impacted how the wounded were removed from the battlefield.</p>
EVALUATION/ CLOSING	Who was Jonathan Letterman? What did he do that was so important during the Civil War? How do his actions still impact us today?	Who was Jonathan Letterman and what changes did he make to medical care during the Civil War? How do these changes still impact us today?

**REQUIREMENTS**

- This can be adapted to students needs as necessary.

**MATERIALS**

- Worksheets attached

**NOTES**

This lesson can be done digitally in Microsoft Word or Google Docs. This can be modified so that students can use creative writing techniques or answer and meet certain requirements.

## Appendix A

Jonathan Letterman became the Medical Director of the Army of the Potomac on July 4, 1862. By this time, the Civil War had been raging for more than a year and the Medical Corps had failed in their duty to care for those wounded on the battlefield. For example, at the Battle of First Bull Run in July 1861, many wounded were left on the battlefield to suffer for days in the hot sun.

Letterman arrived at a crucial time. By the end of August, Confederate General Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia began crossing into Union-controlled Maryland, indicating a huge battle was imminent. Letterman quickly got to work. First, he brought all the medical supplies and ambulances to the future battlefields of Maryland. He then reorganized the ambulance corps and drivers and stretcher-bearers practiced the removal of wounded soldiers from the battlefield quickly and efficiently. The ambulance corps had performed poorly in earlier battles, often hauling supplies instead of patients.

Letterman also developed a system to care for the wounded. On the battlefield, assistant surgeons were at aid stations located close to the fighting. They evaluated each patient and ensured that those with severe, treatable wounds were treated first. Today, we call this triage. Once stabilized, the soldier was sent by ambulance to a field hospital set up further behind the lines where major surgery took place if needed. Once well enough to be moved, the soldier was sent to a larger general hospital located in a major city for long term recovery.

Additionally, Letterman reorganized field hospitals. He ordered that instead of being scattered across the battlefield, field hospitals were to be centrally located near the battlefield and staffed by skilled surgeons and medical personnel. These field hospitals were strategically located to quickly receive the wounded and provide effective medical care. When the Battle of Antietam erupted on September 17, 1862, Letterman and his surgeons were prepared. In the bloodiest single day of the Civil War, the Medical Corps performed admirably - more than 10,000 wounded soldiers scattered across the battlefield were placed in field hospitals within 24 hours.

Letterman would continue to reorganize the Army's system of medical care, dedicated to improving the treatment and chance of survival of wounded soldiers. These changes, ordered in October 1862, are known as The Letterman Plan. The plan ensured that wounded soldiers would be cared for from the moment they were injured through long term recovery. Letterman resigned from his position as Medical Director in January 1864. However, his plan lived on as law. In March 1864, the U.S. Congress implemented Letterman's changes across the entire U.S. Army. They remain today, a basis for our modern EMS system and combat medicine.

## Appendix B

Jonathan Letterman's innovation and restructuring of the Union Army's Medical Corps make him a hero of Civil War medicine. Letterman became the Medical Director of the Army of the Potomac on July 4, 1862. By this time, the Civil War had been raging for more than a year and the Medical Corps had largely failed in their duty to adequately care for those wounded on the battlefield. At the Battle of First Bull Run in July 1861, for example, many wounded were left on the battlefield to suffer for days in the hot sun.

Letterman arrived at a crucial time; by the end of August, General Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia began crossing the river into Union-controlled Maryland. The stage was set for the biggest challenge of Jonathan Letterman's life. His first task was to bring all of the medical supplies and ambulances from the Virginia Peninsula to the future battlefields of Maryland. Letterman also reorganized the ambulance corps with officers, men, ambulances and horses all under the control of the Medical Department. Ambulance drivers and stretcher-bearers practiced the removal of wounded soldiers from the battlefield to field hospitals in the rear, their training emphasizing speed and efficiency. The ambulance corps had performed poorly in earlier campaigns, often being used to haul supplies instead of patients.

Letterman also sketched out a tiered-system of care to evaluate and treat each patient – today we call this triage. Wounded soldiers were first treated just behind the front lines at a Field Dressing Station. Once stabilized, the soldier would be sent via ambulance to a field hospital set up further behind the lines where major surgery took place if needed. Once well enough to be moved, the soldier was sent to a larger general hospital located in a major city for long term recovery.

Additionally, Letterman mandated that field hospitals be organized by division, centrally located near the battlefield, and staffed by skilled surgeons and medical personnel. Instead of hospitals scattered across the battlefield, whose location was dictated by junior medical officers, Letterman and his team placed hospitals in locations designed to expedite the flow of wounded and provide medical care more efficiently. All the while, far in the rear, Letterman's team selected hospital sites for wounded and sick soldiers close to a major railroad for speedy evacuation to general hospitals. These evacuation hospitals allowed military medical personnel to oversee medical care from the moment of wounding through long term rehabilitation.

When the Battle of Antietam erupted on September 17, 1862, Letterman and his surgeons were prepared. In the bloodiest single day of the Civil War, the Union and Confederate armies engaged in horrific combat, leaving behind a landscape of death and suffering. The Medical Corps faced over 10,000 wounded scattered across miles of battlefield. They performed admirably considering the circumstances and removed all wounded from the battlefield within 24 hours, an incredible feat considering the fiasco at the Battle of First Bull Run. Letterman personally oversaw the Medical Corps' response to the battles of Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg

Letterman would continue to reorganize the Army's system of trauma care, dedicated to improving the treatment and chance of survival of wounded warriors. These changes, ordered in October 1862, are known as The Letterman Plan. The plan ensured that wounded soldiers would be cared for from the moment they were injured all the way through long term recovery. Letterman resigned from his position as Medical Director in January 1864. His "plan" lived on, however, as law. In March 1864, the United States Congress implemented Letterman's changes across the entire United States Army. They remain today, a basis for our modern EMS system and combat medicine.

**Additional Resources from the National Museum of Civil War Medicine:**

- [Jonathan Letterman's Desk](#) – In this video Director of Interpretation Jake Wynn highlights Letterman's legacy and shows one of his artifacts which belongs in the museum collection
- [Jonathan Letterman's Legacy](#) – This blog post goes into more depth on Letterman's innovation and legacy.
- [The Letterman Man Plan in Action](#) – Frederick, Maryland became one vast hospital after the Battle of Antietam. Read about Letterman's role in selecting buildings as hospitals.
- [The Letterman Plan From Antietam to D-Day](#) – Trace the development and history of the Letterman plan from the Civil War to World War II.

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