



The Journal of a Civil War Surgeon

J. Franklin Dyer

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The Journal of a Civil War Surgeon J. Franklin Dyer

J. Franklin Dyer's journal offers a rare perspective on three years of the Civil War as seen through the eyes of a surgeon at the front. The journal, taken from letters written to his wife, Maria, describes in lengthy and colorful detail the daily life of a doctor who began as a regimental surgeon in the Nineteenth Massachusetts Volunteers and was promoted to acting medical director of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac.

This firsthand account traces Dyer's attempts to manage his Gloucester household even as the Second Corps fought on the Peninsula, at Second Bull Run, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, and from the Wilderness to Petersburg. Over time his letters to his wife become fraught with the tension of a man losing his early martial ardor as he witnesses the ghastly procession of suffering and death.

Both a talented surgeon and a careful administrator, Dyer nevertheless declined opportunities to work at hospitals in the rear in order to stay near his old regiment and the fighting. He confronted the aftermath of battle—thousands of wounded and dying men—with a small staff and simple instruments. He and his fellow surgeons saved lives as best they could—often at the cost of amputated limbs—then dropped to the ground from exhaustion and slept in blood-drenched uniforms until the cries of the wounded woke them and induced them back to work. Dyer also provides a glimpse of the most devastating opponent the armies faced: disease. He and his medical colleagues fought cholera, typhus, dysentery, measles, and, despite official denials in Washington, a scurvy outbreak that weakened Federal units during the Peninsula campaign.

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