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Fragments of Expectorated Clothing From the Battle of Gettysburg

Tim Clarke, Jr.

Late on the first day of the Battle of Gettysburg, John B. Callis of the 7th Wisconsin Volunteers (part of the famous “Iron Brigade”) survived a gunshot wound “by a ball . . . which entered the right side, immediately over the tenth rib, midway between the sternum and spinal column, fractured the rib, passed downward and backward, and lodged.”¹

Callis had volunteered for service in the Union Army at the age of 33, after stints studying medicine, building army forts on the Minnesota frontier, and visiting California (Callis was a 49er) and Central America. Callis explained to his father: “I then conceived it to be not only my privilege, by my patriotic duty to abandon my business, my home and my family for a time and go to battle for the Nation’s safety.”²

Callis was wounded in early action at Gettysburg, lying on the battlefield for 43 hours, enduring blood loss, intense pain and paralysis on his right side, and jaundice. “Suffering is no name for what I felt,” Callis declared. He was even briefly held as a Confederate prisoner of war, and a Confederate surgeon pronounced that Callis could not live longer than 6 hours.² He was cared for in a private home, and eventually Mrs. Callis joined him there to aid in his recuperation. Callis improved slightly, on a prescribed treatment of tonics, pain-

killers, and stimulants, and a full diet, in addition to a poultice applied to the skin over the liver and lungs.³

He returned to Wisconsin in late 1863 and was mustered on total disability, but returned to service with the Veteran Reserve Corps and was appointed by President Lincoln as Superintendent of the War Department in Washington.

But it is the story of these cloth fragments that is possibly less well known. In his entry in the *Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion*, Callis is described as enduring considerable pain “in the region of the liver, the right lung and shoulder, and expectorated blood.” He reports

National Museum of Health and Medicine, Defense Health Agency—Research, Development and Acquisitions Directorate, 2500 Linden Lane, Silver Spring, MD 20910.

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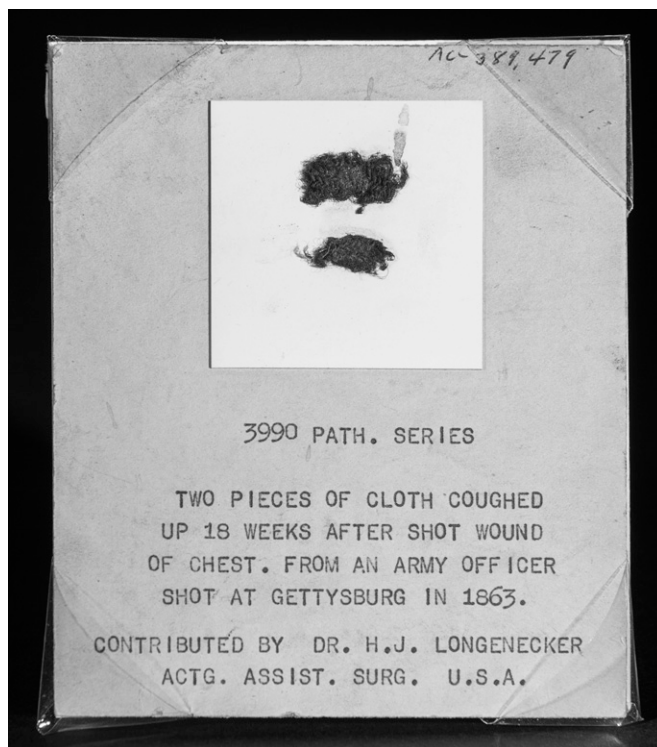


FIGURE 1. Cloth Fragments: When Lt. Col. John Callis, 7th Wisconsin, was shot in the chest at the battle of Gettysburg, fragments of his uniform lodged in his body. Eighteen weeks later, these 2 pieces of cloth were discharged by expectoration. The pictured card showing the pieces of cloth are on display in an exhibit on Civil War medicine at the National Museum of Health and Medicine in Silver Spring, Maryland (M-200.00001) (National Museum of Health and Medicine photo by Matthew Breitbart/Released).

that he discharged pus and bile on regular intervals between July and November, and on November 16, 1863, at an officer's hospital in Annapolis, Maryland, "in a paroxysm of coughing, two pieces of woolen cloth were ejected" (Fig. 1). "I suppose the cloth was taken in with the ball, which still remains in my body," Callis wrote.² The expectorated fragments were contributed to the then Army Medical Museum (today's National Museum of Health and Medicine) by Actg. Asst. Surgeon John. H. Longenecker, U.S. Army. The cloth fragments are on display in an exhibit on Civil War Medicine.

The pain from Callis' injury persisted for the rest of his life, and he suffered from partial paralysis of the lower extremities, acute soreness in the right side of the body, and with nearly every breath, "a heavy tearing pain" sliced through the right lung region, where the bullet had permanently lodged.⁴

Callis amazingly returned to the regular army in 1865 and was posted to Alabama where he assisted in reconstruction efforts and supported the Freedman's Bureau. Callis was elected to Congress from Alabama in 1868,⁴ where he combatted the Ku Klux Klan. He retired to Wisconsin and died there in 1898.

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