Although the exact number is not known, approximately 60,000 surgeries, about three quarters of all of the operations performed during the war, were amputations. Although seemingly drastic, the operation was intended to prevent deadly complications such as gangrene.

Sometimes undertaken without anesthesia, and in some cases leaving the patient with painful sensations in the severed nerves, the removal of a limb was widely feared by soldiers.

Private George W. Lemon was shot in the leg at the battle of the Wilderness on May 5, 1864. He was captured by Confederate soldiers and did not receive treatment for his injuries until he was freed by Union forces over a week later. For more than a year he suffered repeated infections in the wound and poor health, until Surgeon Edwin Bentley amputated the limb. The soldier made a full recovery and was fitted with an artificial leg in 1868.

As Americans sought to put the memory of the conflict behind them, they increasingly ignored the plight of aging, disabled, impoverished veterans. Instead, memorializing the dead and asserting national patriotism became the focus of Civil War remembrances, and the image of the veteran became one of a money-grabbing dependent.
More than three million soldiers fought in the war from 1861-1865. More than half a million died, and almost as many were wounded but survived. Hundreds of thousands were permanently disabled by battlefield injuries or surgery, which saved lives by sacrificing limbs. These men served as a symbol of the fractured nation and remained a stark reminder of the costs of the conflict for long after the war.

“The vast numbers of men disabled by the conflict were a major cause of concern for Rebel and Union leaders. Some worried about preventing idleness and immoral behavior, while others focused on the economic hardship veterans would later face if they could not find employment after the war. Proposed solutions included wartime work as cooks, clerks, and hospital attendants, pensions and convalescent homes for those discharged from the army because of their disability, and funds for the purchase of artificial limbs.

The Invalid Corps was established by the federal government in 1863 to employ disabled veterans in war-related work. Soldiers were divided up into two battalions, based on the extent of their injuries. The first carried weapons and fought in combat. The second, made up of men with more serious impairments, served as nurses, cooks, and prison guards.

Members of the Invalid Corps (known as the “Cripple Brigade” among their former comrades), were not offered the generous financial awards granted to re-enlisting soldiers and new recruits in the Union. Nicknamed “Inspected-Condemed” after the initials stamped on faulty goods, the Invalid Corps was renamed the Veteran Reserve Corps in 1864 to put an end to the mockery.

The selflessness of soldiers fostered great respect in the years after the war. In 1862 the federal government allocated Union veterans $75 to buy an artificial leg and $50 for an arm, and by 1864 the Confederacy was also providing financial assistance for such purchases. Pension payments were increased regularly, and men pursuing political office often found that their obvious injury proved useful in attracting voters. Displaying an “honorable scar” in this way, especially during and immediately after the war, helped amputees to assert their contribution to the cause.

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