J R Army Med Corps 2005; **151:** *207-208*

FAMOUS FIGURES

Jean Dominique, First Baron Larrey

JSG Blair

No list of famous figures is complete without the name of Larrey, Napoleon's surgeon. Jean Dominique (Figure 1) was born in 1766, three years before his mighty master, at the foot of the Pyrenees in the village of Baudéan. An orphan from early life, he was fostered by his uncle, Alexis Larrey, a professor in one of the largest hospitals in Toulouse, where Jean studied medicine. When he was 21 he went to Paris to complete his training under Desault, the surgical chief in the Hotel Dieu and his colleague de Louis. He then entered the French Navy, and became surgeon on the frigate *Vigilante* on her voyage to North America. But his sea sickness was bad enough to stop his naval career.



Fig 1. Jean Dominique, First Baron Larrey.

He was back in Paris in 1789, the year of the outbreak of the French Revolution, and became one of its children, joining the attack on the Bastille. Soon after he entered the French Army and from 1st April, 1792, he became a major in the Army of the Rhine. Now and for the rest of his life, he would serve in the never-ending wars of Napoleon against, as it turned out, all the other nations of Europe.

Larrey was soon anxious at the failures in the French military system. He saw these when he came to be Medical Commander of Custine's Division, especially during the fighting around Mayence and Strassburg. There was no good method of dealing with the removal of casualties from the field. The regulations demanded that the carriers for wounded had to remain a league from the fighting line, and they had to remain where they were until after the engagement was over. After a victory, it could be several hours before evacuation began, but after a defeat, casualties were usually left abandoned where they lay.

Larrey's solution was the 'flying ambulance' *(ambulance volante)* (Figure 2). These were horse drawn wagons for collecting wounded from the battlefield to the base hospitals. He described the system in the minute detail so typically French in his report from the Italian Campaign of 1797. His system consisted both of transport of medical supplies and of personnel. The personnel included a medical officer, a quartermaster, an NCO, a drummer boy (who carried the bandages) and 24 infantrymen (1). At once its presence raised the morale of the French Revolutionary Army. It was soon copied by other nations. Not only was it effective, but in the wide range of campaigns which Napoleon entered into, it proved applicable in all types of terrain – except the Russian campaign, where it is likely that nothing could have helped during the Retreat from Moscow of 1812.

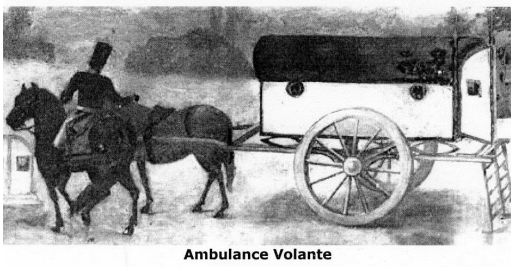


Fig 2. Ambulance Volante.

Now that he had in place a system of evacuation, Larrey began to think about the detail of casualty management. It is possible that he was the first to think in terms of triage. He wrote: *'those who are dangerously wounded should receive the first attention, without regard to rank or distinction. They who are injured in a less degree may wait until their brethren-in-arms, who are badly mutilated, have been operated and dressed, otherwise the latter would not survive many hours; rarely surviving until the succeeding day. Besides with a slight wound, it is easy to repair to the hospital*

Dr JSG Blair OBE KStJ TD TAVRD BA ChM DLitt (honoris causa) FRCS FRCP FICS DRCOG FRNISTS FSA (Scot)

World Vice-President International Society for the History of Medicine The Brae, 143 Glasgow Road, Perth PH2 0LX

J R Army Med Corps: first published as 10.1136/jramc-151-03-13 on 1 September 2005. Downloaded from http://militaryhealth.bmj.com/ on April 13, 2020 by David Vassallo Windr Avenue. Protected by copyright.

of the first or second line, especially for officers who generally have means of transport. Finally, life is not endangered by such wounds.' (1). Some French writers give Larrey credit for being the first to require that wounded from both sides be treated equally, but it was Sir John Pringle who did this earlier (2, 3).

By 1803, Jean Dominique had been appointed Surgeon-in-Chief to the French Army. He had before this been appointed Professor of Surgery at the Val de Grace School in Paris. He would accompany his chief Napoleon on all his numerous campaigns – he had already been with him in Egypt, where the ambulances volantes would still be effective in desert conditions, and in Palestine and Syria. All the while, his experience of war wounds became more extensive. In the Peninsular War, for example, he studied lower limb wounds from the land mines used by the Spanish. After the Battle of Curunna, he was ill with what was probably Typhus Fever, and for a time his life was despaired of. Indeed his death was reported in Paris, and this badly affected the health of Madame Larrey, who had just had a baby son. But he recovered, was able to travel, and reached Paris on 5th April, 1809, weary but convalescent (4). In 1810 he was honoured by Napoleon and became Baron Larrey.

Like many great medical men, he was careful to record in detail. He was prepared to record the failures as well as the successes. This was especially so in his despatches from the Russian Campaign of 1812, where he not only described specimen cases of trauma, but the military course of the battles, in considerable detail (5).

The Battle of Waterloo was when his courage was noticed by no less than The Duke of Wellington. Seeing Larrey treating a wounded soldier in a dangerously exposed position, the Duke made his famous comment of a man 'of an age no longer ours.' It was noticeable that even when a most senior medical general, Larrey continued to treat wounded men personally. At the farm of La Belle Alliance, when the French were losing, Napoleon himself ordered Larrey to withdraw his ambulances and to make for the frontier. His medical party was overtaken by some Prussian cavalry. Larrey fired his pistols at them, and when they returned fire with carbines, his horse was wounded. He then fell with his horse. While on the ground he was cut by two sabres and left for dead. On regaining his senses, he again tried to reach French soil on foot, was taken prisoner by the Prussian soldiers, who robbed him of his arms, watch, and most of his clothes. They then took him to a senior Prussian officer, who ordered him to be shot. But a Prussian surgeon-major recognised him as the man who had lectured in Berlin in 1812; he was eventually released by Blucher himself, whose son Larrey had helped in the past, and sent to Brussels.

After the end of Napoleon's reign, the great Emperor continued to speak of his old surgical general with great affection – *'the worthiest man I ever met'* and left him a hundred thousand francs in his will.

In his later years, Larrey continued to teach, visit veterans in Paris, and actually helped injured during the revolution of 1830. In 1826, he visited Britain, to study hospital systems. While in London, he was treated with respect and affection by many of the most distinguished figures of the day. There he met McGrigor, and it must have been an interesting conversation, as Mcgrigor had been his opposite number in the Peninsular War, and had done even more than him in his reforms of our own military medical services.(6). Larrey died in 1842.

References

1. www.trauma.org/history/larrey.html
2. The Scots Contribution to Military Medicine, in *The Influence of Scottish Medicine*, 1986, Parthenon Press, JSG Blair.
3. Life of Sir John Pringle, new DNB, JSG Blair, 2004.
4. Life and Work of Jean Dominique Larrey, SG Sir Launcelotte Gubbins, United Services Medical Society.
5. Napoleon's Surgeon J.Henry Dible, Heinemann, 1970.
6. Life of Sir James McGrigor, new DNB, JSG Blair, 2004.

J R Army Med Corps: first published as 10.1136/jramc-151-03-13 on 1 September 2005. Downloaded from http://militaryhealth.bmj.com/ on April 13, 2020 by David Vassallo Windr Avenue. Protected by copyright.