

The Civil War Deception of Robert Arthurs

Introduction by Gary Link,
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AT the outbreak of the American Civil War the U.S. Army Medical Department consisted of only 98 doctors. Each regiment of soldiers answering the president’s first call for volunteers was required to provide its own physician. After the induction of these first 75,000 soldiers, each state governor appointed a surgeon and assistant surgeon to each regiment. But the Army had trouble keeping these doctors in uniform. Many resigned or took long leaves of absence after just a short term of field duty.

The following letter was given to the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania by Dr. Henry C. Flood, of Pittsburgh, in 1936. In it, Pittsburgher Robert Arthurs describes to an acquaintance, one Robert Lomas, his medical service experiences in the Union Army. Arthurs says his original purpose in approaching the Army was to locate his brother, who had secretly volunteered. To gain information, Arthurs infiltrated the Army by posing as a surgeon.

How was he able to do this? In his *Doctors in Blue* (New York, 1952), George Adams explains that not all of the governors’ selections were qualified surgeons. Some

were political appointees with no qualifications, while those qualified were often young and inexperienced. The federal government required prospective Army surgeons to take an examination, but this posed a dilemma for state governments: If they adhered to the examinations, they could never provide the Army enough surgeons; but if they relaxed requirements, they filled the Army with unqualified physicians. And what of “qualified” surgeons? Medical school in the United States at that time consisted of two nine-month terms. The second year repeated the first year’s lectures, and there was little or no laboratory or clinical instruction. After schooling,

the student spent a period of time working with a practitioner.

In Arthurs’s case, he says, the Army did not require him to show any credentials. And once in, Arthurs not only avoided detection as a charlatan, but this man, whose entire medical training consisted of having two brothers who were doctors, proved himself superior several times to many of the genuine Army surgeons.

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August 28, 1886.
Robert Lomas, Esq.,

Dear Sir:

Your long and interesting letter was duly received. You will pardon my hurry to answer it. I would, however, at once correct a wrong impression you got from my allusion to a visit to the battle fields. I never was a soldier — tried to enlist but was refused, on account of defective lungs. The next best thing I could do in that line was to hire a substitute, for which I paid \$1,800. He proved of no credit to me — he was a “bounty jumper.” At the battle of Cold Harbor, June 12, 1864, our forces suffered such terrible loss in killed and wounded, that a call was made for volunteer

surgeons. I had two brothers in that profession, and being in the same house with them for a number of years, while students, and after they began to take practice, I was somewhat familiar with the technical terms of their trade and a little acquainted with the trade itself. One of my brothers volunteered and went off without our knowing he had gone. He was in bad health and altogether unfit to go. When I found he had gone I undertook to follow him. At that time it was almost an impossibility for an outsider to get within the lines. I trusted to luck, and on the train going I became acquainted with a real surgeon, who had been accepted, and I asked him to allow me to be his companion, and in his or our interview with the Surgeon-General to merely use the pronoun we, which we agreed to do. When we arrived in Washington City and reported to the highest medical officer in the country, I did not open my lips excepting to give my name, and in five minutes I was a regular contract surgeon in the U.S. Army, with orders to report at the White House on the Chickahominy River, near the battle field. There were then thousands of people in Washington anxious to get to the front, whose sons, husbands or brothers were there, to learn their fate more positively than the official returns would show, and more speedily. Many were offering \$1,000 for a pass, without avail. I reported and after some trouble found my brother in the 18th Corps Hospital, very busy, and I at once set to with him. In a few days a change of base was ordered, and the Surgeon in charge concluded to send us home, but on my special request consented that we should accompany the army to the new field. The move was sudden and secret; between night and morning all stores that could be put on the boats were sent away with the hospital surgeons and supplies, down the river and up the James

River to City Point, and the army marched across country to Petersburg. We arrived at our destination quickly and the fighting began at once. When evening set in, at bed time my brother and myself made a bed of our blankets on the ground, but before getting to sleep were driven out by a field hospital wagon drawn by six mules. In conversing with the officer in charge, I learned that they were badly in need of surgical help, and we got into the wagon and went with it to the front. I fully expected to go into Petersburg that night, and into Richmond the next day, and we would have done so if a halt had not been ordered. The enemy was completely surprised — one night of rest on our part and one night of activity on their part continued the war just about one year longer. We halted at a large country house, with every floor

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covered with wounded men and the lawn outside so thick that you could walk about only with great care. Here we spent the night among groans and cries, which we could not relieve, because we had no lights, our supplies not having yet come up, and the night very dark. As soon as day broke we were at work and in four or five hours had all cleaned up and sent to the rear. Here occurred many inter-

esting incidents. One or two I might narrate. One man whose leg was so badly fractured that it had to be amputated, resisted earnestly and fearfully. “How could he meet his wife with one leg?” He would rather die, etc., etc. The surgeons were heartless — they told him they had nothing to do with his wife — their business was to save life, and in a half minute he was thrown upon the table — I applied the chloroform — in another minute he was quiet — and in a very short time he was sent to the rear with one leg. When all had been attended to as I thought — a colored lad leaned against a tree. I asked what he wanted. He had been shot he said. Having his gun still in his hands this was not suspected. The bullet passed through the fleshy part of the thigh. He was soon fixed up and was taken back — happy — still holding on to his gun. At noon of that day we made a hasty advance to the field with continuous fighting, and there remained for some weeks. Here we saw more fresh blood in the short time we stayed than any soldier who served the whole war through. At one time, forgetting the great cause, I felt that it would be almost justifiable to shoot the captured out of the cannon-mouth as it was once said an English general did in India. It was only for a moment, and I — we all — treated the prisoners as tenderly as our own men. A few incidents of those which occurred here I might narrate. One night we were prepared for large work but it happened our corps did not go into the fight and but few wounded came in — among them a fine looking man whom fear had overcome and he shot off his own thumb. This was known by the powder marks on the hand. He stood firm and never winced while the surgeon dressed the wound. They told him he should have wrapped his handkerchief around his hand and then the powder marks would not have been seen.

With the knife they slowly cut and anatomically examined every nerve, vein, artery, & c., & c., occupying a full hour in dressing the wound. It was cruel, but curious. That man was no coward — he was not the least impatient — sad, sorrowful and greatly ashamed. He had been struck by that irrepressible dread, and he could not help doing what he did.

Having a minute or so of leisure, one morning, I was walking through another hospital and was spoken to by a soldier, lying on the grass. He called me by name, and had to explain to me who he was before I knew him. He was the son of an old acquaintance in Pittsburgh, and had been shot quite through the breast, the bullet coming out in the back. He said his wound had not been dressed — they had thought it not worth while — he would soon die, &c., &c. I told him I thought not, his eye did not tell me so, and I would dress his wound, which I did, and gave him encouraging words and a good drink of whiskey and water. He came home, got well, and went back and served the war out. When through with him I inquired if there were any other Pittsburghers there. A man standing near heard me and approaching said he was from Pittsburgh, and told me his name and where he lived. He requested me to examine his wound and say if I thought his brain was injured. I took off the bandage. The ball had passed straight through under the nose and carried out both eyes. (Henry Cooke)* I encouraged him in like manner. He also afterwards came home — got well — but died suddenly about one year afterwards.

I was in the service some less than two months, and that I was not a surgeon had not been suspected. On two occasions I was

tempted to confess, but did not. Once when a subject had been placed on the table to have a leg amputated. The bullet had broken the thigh bone and the surgeons after examining the wound carefully were still uncertain what to do, when they stepped back and

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requested me to examine the case and give an opinion. I hesitated only a moment, but made the examination carefully with the ear and touch as I had seen them do, and gravely stated that I would not take that man’s leg off, and they sent him away. From what I had seen and learned I believed the man’s chances of life were about the same with the leg on as with it taken off, and gave him the benefit of the doubt. On a former occasion I saved a man’s leg, and perhaps his life, and on his way home he came to my house to thank me. He was lying on the field ticketed for amputation. As I looked at him I felt sorry — he was so handsome — physically almost perfect — and a good clear eye. I talked with him and he conversed calmly and asked me what I thought his chances were for life if the leg was taken off and what, if not. I told him they were about the same, and he pleaded so hard for his leg that with his consent I took off the ticket and tore it up and went to work to fix up his leg. With his aid in pulling in one direction, and I at the foot in the other direction, we stretched and straightened the limb, and with boards of a cracker

box I bound it up, and with crackers slipped in where needed made the splints firm, and directing him to remain where he was — under a shading tree — as long as they would allow him, and with little other encouragement, I left him and did not again see him until he came to my home months afterwards — on crutches with a short leg, but as he said much better than none.

Another occasion I came near confessing but did not. A train of twenty-one ambulances loaded with capital cases — such as had lost arms and legs — had been made up and I was directed to take it to City Point. I took care to see that tourniquets were provided and started. We had about nine miles to go and the roads not very good. The jolting of the wagons caused much suffering, particularly in gutters, which the drivers would go straight over. I insisted they should cross at an angle which would relieve the jolt just one half. It was little trouble and at first they tried to say they were right and I was wrong. I insisted, however, and felt sure that afterwards the groans were not so loud. I got through safely but very tired. I had been working all the previous night, and had no sleep and almost no food. On the return I lay on my back in a bloody ambulance and slept the whole distance, and we went back on the trot.

Enough for explanation. It would tire you out if I put on paper all the curious things that happened while I played doctor. It is the first time I ever tried to put them on paper, and had no idea so much space would be required. You may say I did wrong. We got credit for doing much good. I never asked the Govt. for my pay and never intend to — I was more than paid by the satisfaction and the experience.

With kindest regards, I am,

Yours,
Robt. Arthurs

*This name was typed in between the two lines that constituted the previous sentence.