



*Albert James Myer, an Army Doctor
in Texas, 1854–1857*

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IN A RECENT ARTICLE IN THIS JOURNAL, JAMES O. BREEDEN GAVE AN excellent account of the army's medical history in Texas during the years between the Mexican and Civil wars, which, as he says, not only throws light on the army's medical history but also upon that of the settler. Breeden's account, based as it is partly upon the Surgeon General's *Statistical Report on the Sickness and Mortality in the Army of the United States*,¹ provides in summary and tabular fashion a wealth of statistical information and references that, taken together, constitute a great fund of information on the subject. Breeden's article is thus a made-to-order backdrop for the account that follows of Albert James Myer, a young assistant surgeon in the army who served variously at Forts Davis and Duncan in the years 1854–1857, and for the letters he wrote to his future brother-in-law James Walden. Myer's experiences, though limited in time and place, give life and a personal dimension to the statistical view so ably presented in the Breeden account and probably provide a typical view of army medicine as practiced on the western frontier of the 1850s. With David A. Clary's 1972 article on Dr. Daniel Weisel's tour of duty at Fort Davis in the post-Civil War period, a substantial published record of the medical history of Fort Davis and the beginnings of a similar history of Fort Duncan are now available.²

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¹U.S., Surgeon General's Office, *Statistical Report on the Sickness and Mortality in the Army of the United States, Compiled from the Records of the Surgeon General's Office . . .* (3 vols.: Washington, D.C., 1849, 1856, 1860). These reports, Jan., 1849–Jan., 1860, were prepared for publication as follows: [Volume I] (1849–1850) by Samuel Furry, and [Volumes II and III] (1850–1855 and 1855–1860, respectively) by Richard H. Coolidge. Volumes II and III, published as 34th Cong., 1st Sess., Sen. Exec. Doc. 96, Ser. 827, and 35th Cong., 1st Sess., Sen. Exec. Doc. 52, Ser. 1035, will be cited hereafter as Coolidge, *Statistical Report*.

²James O. Breeden, "Health of Early Texas: The Military Frontier," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, LXXV (Apr., 1977), 357–398; David A. Clary, "The Role of the Army Surgeon in the West: Daniel Weisel at Fort Davis, Texas, 1868–1872," *Western Historical Quarterly*, III (Jan., 1972), 53–66.

While the account that follows focuses upon and is mostly concerned with Albert Myer's tour of duty as an army doctor in West Texas, it is rounded out with some attention both to his formative years and to his career after he left Texas. This is to put his Texas years in perspective and to inform readers who otherwise might be unacquainted with his major contributions to the army and to the development of a national weather service.

Albert James Myer was born in Newburgh, New York, on September 20, 1828. He was reared by Serena McClanan, a maiden aunt in Buffalo, following his mother's death in 1835 and his father's remarriage. After graduation from Geneva (now Hobart) College in 1847, he studied medicine as a private student and attended a course of lectures at the University of Buffalo. He also worked in the Buffalo office of the New York State, or Merchants' State, Telegraph Company, which used Alexander Bain's electrochemical telegraph and an alphabet of dots and dashes that was much like the Morse alphabet. For his medical degree, which he took at Buffalo in 1851, Myer prepared a thesis on "A New Sign Language for Deaf Mutes" in which he explained how the Bain telegraphic alphabet could be adapted to a "system of sign writing" that would serve as well by silent taps upon a cheek or hand as by a tattoo upon a table and could be used and understood by both the blind and the deaf and dumb.³

Looking toward a possible medical career in the army, Myer inquired about becoming a medical officer and began preparing for the examination. Then, without warning, while swimming in Lake Erie one day, he experienced a bleeding that suggested tuberculosis. Upon medical advice he gave up all work until after Christmas, 1851. Then he went to South Carolina, where he tutored at a plantation near Stateburg and may have practiced medicine briefly. The next year, 1852, he went to Florida and for about a year practiced medicine at Monticello, near Tallahassee. There he saw a variety of patients, many of them slaves with such names as Isaac, Daphne, and January, who were afflicted with about everything from bad teeth to syphilis. For treating the latter the young doctor administered caustic potash and mercury and charged a fee of twenty dollars. Sometimes circumstances required that he spend

³Albert J. Myer, "A New Sign Language for Deaf Mutes, Being a Thesis for the Degree of Doctor of Medicine," *Buffalo Medical Journal and Monthly Review of Medicine and Surgical Science*, VI (June, 1851), 774-780. A fuller discussion of the facts concerning Myer's life will be found in Paul J. Scheips, "Albert James Myer, Founder of the Army Signal Corps: A Biographical Study" (Ph.D. dissertation, The American University, 1960), Facsimile No. 66-3993, University Microfilms, Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan.

long hours with a patient, as in the case of a child named Sam who died from acute bronchitis although Myer watched over him all one night and into the afternoon. He treated an abortion case and he bled patients. He gave enemas (at fifty cents each), he used a catheter, and he otherwise and variously ministered to his patients.⁴

The work was good experience for one beginning the practice of medicine, but as his health seemed restored, Myer renewed his resolve to enter the army. Leaving Florida in November, 1853, he took the army medical board examination in New York City, apparently in mid-January, 1854, and, having passed it, received a somewhat delayed appointment as an assistant surgeon to rank from September 18, 1854.⁵

The army that Myer now entered was a tiny one, for in November, 1854, its actual strength was less than eleven thousand men, many of whom garrisoned half a hundred posts scattered across the western frontier. The service of medical officers (95 in 1855, counting the surgeon general but not counting contract surgeons) was "very arduous" in the years between the Mexican and Civil wars, which were the last years of Surgeon General Thomas Lawson's long tour of duty in the Medical Department.⁶

⁴Myer kept a small diary for the years 1851-1853. In the entries for the period January 2-November 17, 1853, he kept a record of his medical practice in Florida: whom he treated, their ailments, the kinds of treatments, the dosages prescribed, the results in some cases, and his medical and mileage fees. The little volume is a fascinating and historically valuable record, which is summarized in some detail in Scheips, "Albert J. Myer," 98-101. The present writer has a copy of this diary, together with the other Myer diaries cited hereafter, and expects ultimately to deposit it with his other Myer notes and documents in the U.S. Army Military History Institute at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. The original diaries are among the material in the main corpus of the Albert James Myer Papers at the Signal Corps Museum; hereafter cited as Myer Papers, SigC. Mus. The museum, long at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, recently moved to Fort Gordon, Georgia. A microfilm copy of these papers (on 4 reels prepared by Helen C. Phillips, then the director of the museum) is in the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. This 4-reel microfilm copy of the papers is separate from the small body of original Myer letters and other material in the Library of Congress, Accession 5184. The latter material containing, among other things, Myer's letters to James Walden, are cited hereafter as Myer Papers, LC.

⁵The army medical board that examined Myer convened on December 1, 1853, and remained in session over two months. That Myer took his examination in January is suggested by the January 17, 1854, date on what appears to be an examination paper on pneumonia, which is in the Medical Officers' File, Myer, A. J. (A.S., 1854-1859), Records of the Adjutant General's Office (Rols., AGO), Record Group (RG) 94, National Archives (NA). For additional details concerning Myer's appointment, see Scheips, "Albert J. Myer," 104-106; "Report of the Surgeon General," Nov. 8, 1854, in *Reports of the Secretary of War* (1854), 33d Cong., 2d Sess., Sen. Exec. Doc. 1, Ser. 747, 82; Thomas Lawson to Myer, Feb. 15, 1854; Richard H. Coolidge to Myer, Sept. 18, 1854; Jefferson Davis to Myer, Sept. 19, 1854; and Myer's commission, Jan. 10, 1855 (effective Sept. 18, 1854), Myer Papers, LC.

⁶Eugene Bandel, *Frontier Life in the Army, 1854-1861*, translated by Olga Bandel and Richard Jente and edited by Ralph P. Bieber (Glendale, California, 1932), 21; Harvey E. Brown, *The Medical Department of the United States Army from 1775 to 1873* (Washing-

Myer's first duty assignment was to accompany a detachment of more than 300 recruits bound from New York for posts in Texas under the command of Captain Sidney Burbank of the 1st Infantry Regiment. Myer's destination, as well as that of some of the recruits (some with their wives and children), was Fort Duncan at Eagle Pass, Texas. Others in the party, besides the recruits (some with their wives and children), were Captain James B. Ricketts of the 1st Artillery; Lieutenant William B. Lane of the Mounted Riflemen; Lane's wife Lydia; and Brevet Second Lieutenant Zenas R. Bliss, 1st Infantry, fresh out of West Point. Both Lydia Lane and Bliss later produced lively recollections that add much to Myer's own early letters and diaries.⁷ In New York Myer got his military career off to an auspicious beginning at army headquarters by addressing Lieutenant Colonel Lorenzo Thomas, the assistant adjutant general, as "Major Thomas." In New York he also met the aging General-in-Chief Winfield Scott.⁸

The journey to Texas was made by sea aboard a large, full-rigged ship, the *Middlesex*, which sailed on October 21. The voyage was marked by a windless sea in the Bahamas, a fight between the crew and the recruits, a fire from an upset kettle of bacon fat, and stormy seas near the end of the journey, all of which at least broke the tedium of the voyage. On November 7, the recruits and other passengers transferred to a government steamer to cross the bar at Aransas Pass.⁹

The recruits landed on St. Joseph's Island to get cleaned up. Mostly, however, they got roaring drunk on a supply of whiskey that had arrived ahead of them. There, on the following night, with the wind blowing and a strong tidal current running out, a lighter "crowded with drunken

ton, D.C., 1873), 198-214; Percy M. Ashburn, *A History of the Medical Department of the United States Army* (New York, 1929), 63 (quotation), 66-67; and the annual reports of the surgeon general for the period.

⁷When the detachment arrived at Fort Duncan, the commanding officer at that post reported its composition as 23 privates and 2 musicians of the 1st Artillery and 286 privates and 15 musicians of the 1st Infantry—a total of 327. [Joseph] Plympton to [Samuel] Cooper, Dec. 7, 1854, Rds., AGO, Letters Received, 302-P (1854), RG 94, NA. To Plympton's figures must be added, however, those who deserted or who died en route. For brief service records of Burbank and the other army officers mentioned here and below, see Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army . . . to March 2, 1901* (2 vols.; Washington, 1903), I. See also Lydia Spencer Lane, *I Married a Soldier or Old Days in the Old Army* (reprint; Albuquerque, 1964). On Bliss and his old friend "Meyer," as he calls him, see Z. R. Bliss, "Reminiscences of Zenas R. Bliss, Major General United States Army" (5 vols. in typescript; Archives, University of Texas Library, Austin), at least part of which Bliss wrote in 1886. The author wishes to thank his friend Robert T. Wagner of Austin, who examined this entire manuscript and provided him with a copy of Volume I, hereafter cited as Bliss Reminiscences, I.

⁸Myer Diary, 1851-1857, Oct. 4, 1854, Myer Papers, SigC Mus.

⁹Bliss Reminiscences, I, 3-6, 15-17; Lane, *I Married a Soldier*, 19-20; and Myer Diary, 1851-1857, Nov. 1854, Myer Papers, SigC Mus.

recruits" bound for Corpus Christi about thirty miles up the shallow bay, collided with the steamer. The lighter captain lost a leg in the collision, as Myer put it, but according to Zenas Bliss the man had his foot crushed so badly that the doctor had to amputate his leg the next morning. The following night there was another collision involving a lighter. Myer thought some of the recruits "probably drowned" in the first accident and Bliss recorded that seven drowned. Bliss was supposed to direct the loading of the men and keep track of them. Under the circumstances he had his hands full and recalled later that Myer was about the only person who tried to help him. Myer's uncertainty concerning the number who drowned presumably resulted from the report that "thirty or forty were missing" (according to Bliss thirty-seven were "lost") and from not knowing how many of that number had drowned and how many had deserted. Captain Burbank's official report to the adjutant general, written after he arrived at Fort Duncan, does not mention the accident and lists thirteen men as having deserted, two as having died, and one as having been left behind sick.¹⁰

When Myer and his companions reached Corpus Christi on November 10 they found yellow fever. George F. Turner, an army doctor, and his daughter had died of the disease. Fortunately, a norther struck the coast the first night the party was ashore and the heavy frost that followed brought an end to the epidemic. Although Myer does not record it, he cared for Bliss, who contracted yellow fever—the only man in the command to come down with the disease.¹¹

Meanwhile, the recruits who had preceded the officers to Corpus Christi, behaved miserably. Still drunk, some of them even entered houses where there were yellow fever patients "and took liquor wherever they could find it." Upon going out to their camp on the beach at Corpus Christi, after dinner in town on the evening of their arrival, Bliss and Myer found the command drunk and disorganized "without commissioned officers or discipline." That night, amid a "serious scene of disorder," one of the men was stabbed in the abdomen and the next day

¹⁰Myer Diary, 1854-1855, Nov. 7, 8 (first and second quotations), 9 (third quotation), 1854, Myer Papers, SigC Mus.; Bliss Reminiscences, I, 6-8, 18; Burbank to Cooper, Dec. 7, 1854, Rcds., ACO, Letters Received, 701 B (1854), RG 94, NA. The present writer has not seen the "more detailed report" that Burbank promised to send Cooper later, Michael F. Musick of the National Archives staff having searched for it in vain. See also Lane, *I Married a Soldier*, 20-21.

¹¹Myer Diary, 1854-1855, Nov. 10, 1854, Myer Papers, SigC Mus.; Lane, *I Married a Soldier*, 21-22; Bliss Reminiscences, I, 11-12, 16, 17-18, 19. The Dr. Turner referred to was probably Major George F. Turner, who died October 17, 1854, after having served as an army doctor since 1833. Heirman, *Historical Register*, I, 674.

Myer arranged for his transfer to the army hospital in Corpus Christi in the care of Dr. Levi H. Holden, an assistant surgeon in the army.¹²

On Sunday, November 12, the detachment of recruits, which Myer now described as "mere rabble," marched to Souta, a campsite about six miles from Corpus Christi, to prepare for the long march ahead. Burbank and his family remained in town for a couple of days, while Myer's hospital wagon or ambulance was the last of the wagons on the road and did not reach the campsite until morning. With the preparations for the journey completed, the detachment got under way on November 16—a train of great sturdy government wagons, each with a capacity of about 3,000 pounds and each drawn by six mules, according to Bliss's recollection, but horses according to Myer's contemporary report. The ordinary rate of travel for such a train was about twenty-five miles a day. In addition to the large wagons there was one spring wagon, presumably Myer's ambulance, which carried the ladies and children of the officers. Others needing to ride found room in the freight wagons, one of which carried Bliss until he was well enough to ride an old mule that he had acquired. The route took the party to Fort McIntosh and Laredo and from there to Fort Duncan.¹³

The march to Fort Duncan, which ended on December 4, was leisurely but not particularly pleasant because the country through which the party traveled was desolate and arid. Bliss thought it "was the poorest and most uninteresting in the State. It was rolling prairie for the first one hundred miles or more" but after reaching the Rio Grande "there was nothing but sand, cactus, dense chaparral [chaparral] and poor grass to the end of our journey." The prairies, though, were full of cottontail and "Jack-ass Rabbits," as Bliss called them. There were also wild horses, or mustangs, quail, which Bliss hunted, and rattlesnakes.¹⁴

Myer, who had never seen such country before, took note of its aridity. The rattlesnakes also impressed him and, killing a large rattler with his revolver one day, he sought to impress James Walden by sending the twelve rattlers from the dead snake. To James he explained how they

¹²Bliss Reminiscences, I, 7, 8 (first quotation); Myer Diary, 1854-1855, Nov. 10 (second quotation), 11 (third quotation), 1854. Myer Papers, SigC Mus. On Dr. Holden see Heitman, *Historical Register*, I, 557.

¹³Myer Diary 1854-1855, Nov. 12 (quotation), 15-16, 1854. Myer Papers, SigC Mus.; Myer to James [Walden], Nov. 15-Dec. 5, 1854. Myer Papers, LC; Bliss Reminiscences, I, 8-15, 22-23, 26. Also see Lane, *I Married a Soldier*, 24-25.

¹⁴Myer Diary, 1854-1855, Nov. 16-18, 21, 26-30, Dec. 1-4, 1854. Myer Papers, SigC Mus.; Bliss Reminiscences, I, 13 (third quotation), 14-15, 19, 23-24 (first and second quotations); Lane, *I Married a Soldier*, 25.

could be made to rattle or sound "the alarm his Snakeship sounds when he remarks with Shakespeare 'here's a coil!'" Indeed, he found the journey through "Indian Country" rather exciting, as he wrote James, for "any bush may conceal an enemy and you sleep at night with your pistols at your pillow and your clothes ready to slip on" in a moment. There were also some pleasant times thanks to Lydia Lane and her Irish helper Mike. Bliss later recalled her hot biscuits, but when she met General Myer in Washington years later he said he "remembered the march, but not the biscuit and molasses." "Poor man!" Lydia commented in telling the story, "he is dead now." Despite pleasant times, however, to the young doctor on the trail the realities of sickness and mortality were always close at hand. In fact, only a day before the party arrived at Fort Duncan he lost his second patient, a man named Buell, who had been very ill.¹⁵

Fort Duncan, at which Myer and his friends arrived with the recruits on December 4, 1854, had been in existence only since 1849. A border post with only secondary Indian responsibilities it was located on the Rio Grande at the shabby and tough little settlement of Eagle Pass. Across the river stood what Frederick Law Olmsted described as the "wretched-looking Mexican town of Piedras Negras" beyond which was "another dreary, hilly desert." Bliss had his old mule stolen from him right on the post on his first day there and concluded later that Fort Duncan was the wildest post at which he had served. Richard W. Johnson, who was also at Fort Duncan in Myer's day, recollected that "while I was stationed at Fort Duncan I think I can safely say that some one was murdered in Eagle Pass or in its vicinity every day in the year."¹⁶

¹⁵Myer to [Walden], Nov. 15, Dec. 6, 1854 (first, second, and third quotations), and Jan. 3 [10], 1855, Myer Papers, LC; Myer Diary, 1854-1855, Dec. 2-3, 1854, Myer Papers, SigC Mus.; Lane, *I Married a Soldier*, 26-27 (fourth, fifth, and sixth quotations); Bliss Reminiscences, I, 14.

¹⁶Among the observations and recollections of Fort Duncan and its environs in the 1850s are the following: Bliss Reminiscences, I, 37-105; R[ichard] W. Johnson, *A Soldier's Reminiscences in Peace and War* (Philadelphia, 1886), 57-51, 62-63 (third quotation), 64-69; Jane Marcie (McManus) Stovus Carneau, *Eagle Pass or Life on the Border* (New York, 1852); Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey through Texas; or, a Saddle-trip on the South-western Frontier . . .* (New York, 1857), 286, 314 (first quotation), 315 (second quotation), 316-321, 506-507; Philip H. Sheridan, *Personal Memoirs of Philip Henry Sheridan*, edited by Michael V. Sheridan (2 vols.; New York, 1902), I, 15-36; Harry Warren (comp.) and Ben F. Pingenot (ed.), *Paseo del Águila: A Chronicle of Frontier Days on the Texas Border as Recorded in the Memoirs of Jesse Sumpter* (Austin, 1969); William T. Field, "Fort Duncan and Old Eagle Pass," *Texas Military History*, VI (Summer, 1957), 160-171; Rusella R. Sellers, "The History of Fort Duncan, Eagle Pass, Texas" (M.A. thesis, Sul Ross State College, 1960), deals with the entire history of the post. See also Freeman's and Mausfield's inspection reports on Fort Duncan in 1853 and 1856, respectively; "W. G. Freeman's Re-

Among the young officers with Myer at Fort Duncan at the end of the year 1854, there were several who later achieved prominence. Among them were Abner Doubleday, "alleged originator of baseball"; Samuel Beckley Holabird, later quartermaster general; and Philip Henry Sheridan, later commanding general of the army. Sheridan, the most famous of these officers because of his Civil War exploits, reportedly scorned Myer as a "wirepuller" and, perhaps for that reason, said nothing in his memoirs about Myer's having been at Fort Duncan with him.¹⁷

Myer hardly had time to get used to his quarters at Fort Duncan, "a room with a mud floor," which he did not much like, before orders in January, 1855, took him to Fort Davis, Texas, an important new post. Located in a canyon in the Davis Mountains north-northwest of the Big Bend of the Rio Grande, Fort Davis stood guard over the lower San Antonio-El Paso Road.¹⁸

port on the Eighth Military Department," edited by M. L. Crimmins, *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, LII (Apr., 1939), 344-347 (Vols. LI-LIV, for entire report); and "Colonel J. K. F. Mansfield's Report of the Inspection of the Department of Texas in 1856," edited by Crimmins, *ibid.* (hereafter cited as "Mansfield's Report"), XLII (Oct., 1938, and Jan., 1939), 124-126, 131, 240-245 (XLII [Oct., 1938, and Jan. and Apr. 1939], 122-143, 215, 256, and 351-387, for entire report). The original of each of these reports is in Reels, ACO, Misc. File 282, RG 94, NA, which is on microfilm—Freeman's on Roll 2064 and Mansfield's on Roll 2063.

¹⁷George W. Cullom, *Biographical Register of the Officers of the U.S. Military Academy* (Vols. I-); Boston and elsewhere, 1891-present), II, 132-133, 398-399; William H. Harris and Judith S. Levy (eds.), *The New Columbia Encyclopedia* (4th ed.; New York, 1975), 787 (first quotation); Lane, *I Married a Soldier*, 29; Sheridan, *Personal Memoirs*, I, 15-36. For Sheridan's reference to Myer in 1866 as "a — old wire-puller," who "wire pulled [him]self from an assistant surgeon to a colonel in the regular army," see O. H. Howard to J. Willard Brown, n.d., as printed in J. Willard Brown, *The Signal Corps, U.S.A. in the War of the Rebellion* (Boston, 1896), 168. Nevertheless, Sheridan in a June 8, 1866, endorsement on Myer to Sheridan, July 5, 1866, expressed the hope that Myer would be restored to his position as chief signal officer of the army. *Ibid.*, 168-169.

¹⁸Myer Diary, 1854-1855, Dec. 5, 1854 (quotation), Myer Papers, SigC. Mus. On Myer's transfer to Fort Davis, see Headquarters, Department of Texas, Special Orders 143, Dec. 28, 1854 (true copy made Jan. 4, 1855, date received at Fort Duncan); Headquarters, Fort Duncan, Orders No. 4, Jan. 9, 1855, Myer Papers, I.C.

On Fort Davis and the Big Bend country, see Bliss Reminiscences, I, 146 ff., *passim*; James M. Day, "Fort Davis," in Roger N. Canger et al., *Frontier Forts of Texas* (Waco, 1966), 111-129; Herbert M. Hart, *Old Forts of the Southwest* (Seattle, 1964), 55-59; Carlyle Graham Rabb, *The Romance of Davis Mountains and Big Bend Country* (Odessa, 1963); Ronnie C. Tyler, *The Big Bend: A History of the Last Texas Frontier* (Washington, D.C., 1975), a beautifully illustrated volume; Barry Scolec, *Fort Davis, Texas, 1857-1960* (Fort Davis, 1963) and *Old Fort Davis* (San Antonio, 1947); W. Stephen Thomas, *Fort Davis and the Texas Frontier: Paintings by Captain Arthur J. Lee, Eighth U.S. Infantry* (College Station, Texas, 1976); Robert M. Utley, *Fort Davis National Historic Site, Texas*, National Park Service Historical Handbooks Series No. 38 (Washington, D.C., 1967); Utley, *Special Report on Fort Davis, Texas*, "The National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings" (mimeographed; Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1960). Also see "Mansfield's Report," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, XLII (Apr., 1939), 351-357.

From the beginning, Fort Davis was better garrisoned than many of the western posts. In 1855, for example, there were six companies of the 8th Infantry Regiment at Fort Davis, with a combined strength of 264 officers and enlisted men. At Fort Duncan that year, with a total strength of 214 (a decline, following troop transfers, from 446 in November, 1854), there were four companies variously drawn from the Regiment of Mounted Riflemen, the 1st Artillery, and the 1st Infantry. While the garrison at Duncan increased to 382 in 1856, when Myer was back at that post, the strength at Davis rose to 438. In 1857, when the strength at Duncan declined to a single company—a total of 71 officers and enlisted men—the garrison at Davis declined only to 321.¹⁹

In the years immediately after its establishment in 1854 Fort Davis patrols had numerous skirmishes with Kiowas and Comanches, who menaced the El Paso road all the way from Devils River to the Davis Mountains, and with Mescalero Apaches of New Mexico, who preyed on the road between the mountains and El Paso. Relations with the Kiowas and Comanches were especially complicated, one writer has pointed out, because for years they believed that there were two distinct categories of white men—Americans and Texans.²⁰

Although Myer himself apparently never came face to face with hostile Indians, he was well convinced that they were never far away. En route to Fort Davis he saw Indian smoke signals "from a hill a mile or two away," and at Fort Clark, on the same journey, he heard about the deaths of seven Comanches that had occurred on the road ahead. To James Walden he sought to justify what had happened. The Comanches, he said, had fled into the tall grass along the Pecos River when surprised by troops, who "had fired at random into a crowd of Mexicans with whom the Comanches were trading," killing one Mexican and badly wounding others. The troops, which consisted of "Texan Rangers and the Rifles," as Myer described them, had then set fire to the grass and "massacred" the Comanches. If the tables had been turned, he said, "the affair would have been styled a diabolical murder." As it was, he explained, "we must try to look upon it as an execution," since the Indians, savages "in the worst sense of the word," treated their prisoners

¹⁹U.S., War Department, *Report of the Secretary of War, 1854-1857*; 33d Cong., 2d Sess., Sen. Exec. Doc. 1, Ser. 747, 58-59; 34th Cong., 1st Sess., Sen. Exec. Doc. 1, Ser. 841, 136-137; 34th Cong., 3d Sess., Sen. Exec. Doc. 16, Ser. 876, 242-243; and 35th Cong., 1st Sess., Sen. Exec. Doc. 11, Ser. 920, 74-75.

²⁰Robert M. Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue: The United States Army and the Indian, 1848-1865* (New York, 1967), 64.

with great cruelty. The troops, he added, now had orders "to take no prisoners; to spare no one; to listen to no terms for peace until the race is cowed by their punishment."²¹

Myer, it may be said, did not care very much for the "Texan Rangers," two of whom joined his escort. They had been mustered into the service to fight Indians, he explained to James Walden, but to him they were nothing more than lazy, ruffianly scoundrels and uncivilized brutes, which put them below "the lowest Canal driver" such as were found on the Erie Canal back home.²²

On Sunday, January 28, 1855, Myer's party reached Fort Davis, "a military village without fortifications," after passing through "a most romantic valley." It was a fine "bright Sunday," with prairie dogs about on the plain, as Myer cantered into the post on his horse Pinkie. Lying in a box canyon at an altitude of 4,700 feet, and near the beautiful Wild Rose Pass and Limpia Creek, Fort Davis was much more pleasantly situated than Fort Duncan. Myer found the climate "delightful" and his position there, at least at first, most agreeable.²³

Various official duties and personal activities occupied Myer's time in the early months of 1855. Then, in April, a serious illness first manifested itself as a sore throat and hoarseness. In early May he suffered from dizziness, a headache, and fever. After three days of fever and chills, he was so sick that he opened his prayer book, which had been sealed since he left Buffalo. Indeed, he now experienced a terrifying illness in which his career, his hopes of marriage to his fiancée Catherine Walden, and even life itself seemed about to go to smash. By his own diagnosis he had a remittent fever (which in various forms was a principal ailment on the frontier) and scorbutus, or scurvy. He had "a general tendency to hemorrhage" from his nostrils, he had ulcers in his mouth, and he had swollen gums. It was, however, the appearance and continuance of blood in his sputum that gave him "the greatest anxiety" for, with his earlier illness in mind, he feared that his current illness had damaged at least one of his lungs permanently.²⁴

²¹Myer to [Walden], Feb. 14, 1855 (quotations). Myer Papers, LC.

²²*Ibid.*

²³Myer's trip to Fort Davis is described in the Myer Diary, 1854-1855, Jan. 11 (2 entries), 12-17, 27-29, 1855; in an additional section of the diary headed "March from Ft Clark to Ft Davis Texas," including entries for Jan. 15, 17, 1855. Myer Papers, SigC Mus.; and in Myer to [Walden], Jan. 9-[10] (first quotation), Feb. 14, 1855 (second, third, and fourth quotations). Myer Papers, LC.

²⁴In general, see Myer's Diary, 1854-1855, May 10-21, 1855, but referring to events as late as August; *ibid.*, 1851-1857, Apr. 23, May 27-28 (2 entries on May 28), 1855. Myer Papers,

The sickness lasted through the spring and, with some remission in June, into the summer, after which he began to recover rapidly. Meanwhile, he seems first to have thought about a change of station, because, for one thing, he could not get vegetables for his diet at Fort Davis, despite the good climate, and then to have sought a sixty-day leave. If he were to die he preferred to be at home with his aunt when the end came. When a leave authorization finally arrived from Corpus Christi in August, however, he was on the mend and was, indeed, with a small party at Wild Rose Pass on the trail of some Indian horse thieves. Convinced that his health was restored, he declined the leave. Thereafter, he seems to have remained in good health until toward the end of his life, when he was plagued by nephritis and a cardiovascular condition that carried him off.²¹

Major General Frederic J. Hughes, Jr., an army medical officer, several years ago published a paper on Myer as a physician and climatologist and concluded that the "duration" of Myer's illness at Fort Davis, "and his ability to go back to duty so quickly afterward, suggests that a recrudescence of tuberculosis was unlikely." As for Myer's belief that he had scurvy, Hughes was "tempted to wonder" if Myer "might have contracted a primary coccidioidomycotic infection, which is now known to be prevalent in the area."²²

²¹SigC Mus. On Myer's own diagnosis, see copy of his certificate of ill health, July 25, 1855 (quotations), enclosed with retained copy of Myer to D[on] C. Buell, July 25, 1855. Myer Papers, LC.

²²Myer Diary, 1851-1857, May 27-28 (2 entries on May 28), June 25, July 9, 1855. Myer Papers, SigC Mus.; undated, and unsigned draft, probably of Myer to Headquarters, Department of Texas, June 11, 1855; Surgeon General's Office (SGO) to Myer, June 23, 1855; Charles M[ic]Cormick to Myer, July 9, 1855, enclosing copy of Alfred Gibbs to McCormick, July 2, 1855, rejecting Myer's request of June 11, for transfer or leave, and stating that Myer should submit a certificate of ill health, Myer Papers, LC. Also Myer to Buell, July 9, 1855, requesting leave through Myer's commanding officer, of which there is a copy in a back section of Myer Diary, 1851-1857, Myer Papers, SigC Mus. Myer to Buell, July 25, 1855, again requesting leave, but this time enclosing certificate of illness; Headquarters, Department of Texas, Special Orders 86 (extract), Aug. 15, 1855, which granted the requested leave; SGO to Myer, Sept. 25, 1855, acknowledging receipt of Myer's letter withdrawing his application for leave, Myer Papers, LC. For Myer's withdrawal of the application, see Myer to Lawson, Aug. 25, 1855. Reels., AGO, Medical Officers' File, Myer, A. J. (A.S., 1854-1859), RG 94, NA.

On Myer's later health and final illness, see Scheips, "Albert James Myer," 645-646; George Martin Kober, *Reminiscences of George Martin Kober, MD., F.I.D. . . .* (Washington, D.C., 1930), 159, 160.

²³Frederic J. Hughes, Jr., "Albert James Myer: Army Physician and Climatologist," *Transactions of the American Clinical and Climatological Association*, LXXXI (1969), 123. Coccidioidomycosis is caused by a "fungus usually found in southwestern parts of the United States," where the disease is known as desert or valley fever. T. R. Van Dellen, "Pollution by Nature Aids Valley Fever," *Chicago Tribune*, May 4, 1972.

Whether or not Myer had scurvy, the fact is that it was a common ailment among troops on the western frontier who did not get enough fresh vegetables and fruits. At Fort McIntosh, where scurvy was the principal disease in 1851, Assistant Surgeon Glover Perin experimented with a local antiscorbutic, the juice of the maguay plant which, when fermented, is pulque. According to Sheridan, at Fort Duncan during the winter of 1854-1855, at which time they had no fresh vegetables, he had to see to it that the men in his company drank a cup of pulque every day at reveille roll call. It was, he said, a vile drink—worse smelling than "sulphureted hydrogen." Myer seems to have made no reference to pulque in his papers, although he reported from Fort Duncan in 1856 that the spring rains had "brought forward the few edible plants valuable . . . as preventives of scurvy." There also had been, he said, a regular issue of antiscorbutics at Duncan during the preceding six months, which had noticeably benefited the men. He thought that the poor living conditions of the troops and the lack of vegetables in their diet were more "conducive to scurvy" than the conditions that ordinarily existed aboard ships at sea. He therefore gave "much attention" to the diet of the troops at Fort Duncan and, as he reported in 1857, requisitioned antiscorbutics "each month whenever the least tendency to scorbutus occurred." There was, he said, "no case of scorbutus contracted at the post," where the soldiers evidently fared better than "some residents in the vicinity, who . . . have not enjoyed a similar regimen." For himself he had a garden with "fine lettuce."²⁷

In August, 1855, when he had recovered his health and was in good spirits at Fort Davis, Myer wrote James Walden about a scouting expedition from which he had just returned, describing his dress and commenting upon the pack mule. He had worn, he said, a black sombrero and a grey coat, worn previously when he had "dressed as 'democratically' as possible"; blue and coarse but very strong army pants; and army shoes with half-inch soles. Besides this basic costume he also wore "belts for powder and shot, pistol belts, great gauntlets and other trappings to form an 'ensemble' more romantic than prepossessing in appearance." His mount Pinkie so annoyed the pack mule on this expedition that the latter became "almost frantic."²⁸

²⁷Sheridan, *Personal Memoirs*, I, 28 (first quotation); Myer, "Sanitary Report" for Fort Duncan, June, 1856, and *ibid.*, June, 1857, in Coolidge, *Statistical Reports*, III, 179-181 (second-seventh quotations); Myer to [Walden], April [1856] (eighth quotation), Myer Papers, LC.

²⁸Myer to [Walden], Aug. 13, 1855, Myer Papers, LC.

The pack mule was a wondrous beast, as Myer thought, whose packing was a genuine puzzle to the uninitiated. "Imagine . . . a mule buried in tents, blankets, pots, Kettles, pans—Pork, Coffee, Hard Bread, Sugar, 'jerked beef,' and other items! Once loaded, of course, "'Muley' objects in the most energetic manner" by kicking, rearing sideways, bumping "her head against the tent poles," and by skillful maneuver often upsetting "the whole Cargo to the infinite wrath of the packers and the sad demolition of crockery." He had discovered, he added, that eggs could be carried safely on mules by packing them in the rice bags, which was "a discovery not lightly to be thought of."²⁹

Earlier, before his illness, Myer had written James Walden that medical officers were envied in the field because they had more mules at their disposal than other officers. Medical transport on muleback, however, had both its advantages and disadvantages, according to Myer. "Yes: it is very fine; a bottle of Harvey Sauce will just fit alongside the Prussic Acid; and salt goes very well in a Quinine bottle! Mustard and Blister Plaster stow very appropriately together and Miss Kate will tell you I ought always to carry Cayenne and *Ginger!*" To this picture he added one of the mule tumbling down the side of a mountain, with the probability that the Harvey Sauce would mix with the prussic acid, the salt with the quinine, the mustard with the castor oil, and the cayenne with the arsenic before the mule recovered his feet and came clattering back up the trail.³⁰

In September, while he was still at Fort Davis, Myer celebrated his twenty-seventh birthday by examining eighty or ninety recruits, most of whom seemed "to be quite fine men." He had received "the kindest & dearest letters from my own and my Aunt." He had also heard from his father, but best of all, next to good health, must have been the news that "my dearest clings to me." He had weighed only 129 pounds in June, but weighed in at 137 pounds or more, probably his best weight yet, he thought, when he declined his leave in August, 1855. Now he seemed inclined to believe that his hemorrhaging had been induced by the altitude of Fort Davis. While celebrating his birthday, Myer was also awaiting a replacement and his transfer to another post, which turned out to be Fort Duncan. On December 9, 1855, he arrived there once again and there served as an assistant surgeon during the rest of his Texas stay.³¹

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Myer to [Walden], Mar. 17–Apr. 4, 1855 (quotation), Myer Papers, LC.

³¹Myer Diary, 1851–1857, Sept. 30 (quotation), June 25, 1855; and *ibid.*, 1854–1855, May

As a medical officer, Myer managed the post hospital first at Fort Davis and then at Fort Duncan, requisitioned medical supplies, gave routine physical examinations, treated patients, and looked after the diet of the troops. Sometimes he also accompanied a scouting party into the field, sent medical and meteorological reports to the surgeon general in Washington, and participated in formal dress musters and reviews. Much of his work was routine, but now and then a patient required major surgery and occasionally sickened beyond medical aid. Thus, at Fort Davis, in February, 1855, Myer performed an amputation, his first, and in April he buried his "third dead patient." At that time he resolved "to be one of the most lenient" of medical officers, for his conscience bothered him for not taking men into the hospital "more easily."²²

Some idea of Myer's medical responsibilities can be seen from the fact that at Fort Duncan there were several hundred cases of illness treated in a year. They ranged all the way from the most trivial complaint that would get a man excused from duty for a day to a mortal illness. Of two deaths at Fort Duncan in the year 1856-1857, according to Myer, one was from chronic diarrhoea in the case of a patient already very sick when brought to the post, and the other evidently from sunstroke under the inattentive eye of an incompetent hospital steward. The principal diseases at Fort Duncan were remittent fever and diarrhoea. Myer thought there was no malaria in the area, but that some soldiers contracted it elsewhere. "A severe form of variola" (smallpox) appeared in Piedras Negras, across the river, which led Myer to vaccinate the relatively few members of the command who had not been vaccinated previously.²³

10-21 (with references of later dates), 1855, Myer Papers, SigC Mus. Myer was ordered to Fort Duncan only after first being ordered to Fort Clark and, while still at Fort Davis, to San Antonio. *Ibid.*, 1851-1857, Nov. 20, 1855, [?], June 1855, Feb. 7, 1857. See also, Myer to [Walden], Oct. 16, Nov. 6, 1855; Headquarters, Department of Texas, Corpus Christi, Special Orders 95, Sept. 14, 1855 (true copy); Headquarters, Department of Texas, San Antonio, Special Orders 108, Oct. 24, 1855 (extract), and Special Orders 119, Nov. 24, 1855 (the Fort Duncan order); Headquarters, Fort Davis, Texas, Orders 96, Nov. 21, 1855, Myer Papers, LC.

²²Myer Diary, 1854-1855, Feb. 21, 1855; *ibid.*, 1851-1857, Apr. 22, 1855 (quotations); Myer Papers, SigC Mus. On the duties of a medical officer at that time, see *Regulations for the Medical Department of the Army* (Washington, 1856); and the various relevant annual reports of the surgeon general, which were published each year with the *Report of the Secretary of War*. See also "Abstracts of the Principal Diseases and Deaths Occurring among the Troops in Texas" (1849-1854), Coolidge, *Statistical Report*, II, 403-411.

²³Myer's "Sanitary Report" for Fort Duncan, June, 1856, and *ibid.*, June, 1857, in Coolidge, *Statistical Report*, III, 179-180, 181 (quotation). According to "Mansfield's Report," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, XLII (Jan., 1939), 248, there were 775 cases of illness and 10 deaths at Fort Duncan from July 1, 1855, to the end of May, 1856, a period during

The hospital at Fort Davis, as described a year or so following Myer's departure, consisted of a large tent and an adjoining jacal (or "hackalc," as Mansfield spelled it) eighty-five feet by twenty, built of pickets and thatched with grass. It was "altogether slightly constructed and . . . in a very rickety condition, neither safe nor a sufficient building for the purposes of a hospital." A "good stone building" with a shingled roof served as a hospital at Fort Duncan. While Myer was there, a fifteen-foot-wide, roofed piazza was added and the wards, which were at first open to the roof, were ceiled. A stone building, with two eighteen-foot square rooms to house a new kitchen and hospital mess was under construction in June, 1857. It was also planned at that time to construct a bath house that would serve as both a dead house and a place for *post mortem* examinations. In 1856 Mansfield found the kitchen "a worthless building," but the hospital dispensary and steward "good," and "the whole department" "well conducted" by Myer. He recommended that the hospital windows, which were then covered with cloth, should be glazed, but it does not appear that this was done before Myer left Fort Duncan.³⁴

There were several problems of medical administration that concerned Myer during his service in Texas. At the beginning he complained about the slowness with which medical supplies arrived at Fort Davis, the state in which they arrived, and the insufficiency of bedding in the hospital (while asking for twenty iron bedsteads and presumably bedding to go with them for the new hospital), and of all hospital stores at Davis, including quinine, castor oil, sweet oil, alcohol, oil of turpentine, Epsom salt, and iodine.³⁵

Later, when he was at Fort Duncan, the Surgeon General's Office held up one of Myer's requisitions until he explained whether the "Citizens" to whom he referred as potential users of medical supplies were "employees of the Government entitled to Medical Attendance or otherwise." In replying, he said he had had reference to teamsters and members of soldiers' families. He did not know whether either group was "legally" entitled to medical attendance, but believed the regulations

which Myer was there a little over half of the time.

³⁴Scobee, *Old Fort Davis*, 21, quoting 2nd Lt. T. M. Jones (second quotation); "Mansfield's Report," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, XLII (Jan., 1939), 243 (third-seventh quotations), 354 (first quotation); Myer's "Sanitary Report" for Fort Duncan, June, 1857, in Coolidge, *Statistical Report*, III, 179-180.

³⁵Myer Diary, 1854-1855, Feb. 28, 1855; Myer to Henry Douglas[s], Feb. 19, 1855; SGO to Myer, May 3, 1855; SGO to Myer, Sept. 8, 1855; and Myer to SGO (draft), n.d., Myer Papers, LC. Also, Myer to Lawson, Mar. 5, 1856, Records of the Office of the Surgeon

covered provision of army medicines to both groups. On personal grounds, however, he objected to providing free medical examinations to such persons, for he viewed his professional knowledge as his private property except in so far as the army itself had a claim on it. Moreover, he feared he might be liable for damages that might result from his treatment of nonmilitary patients and inquired if this were true and "whether in this contingency the Government or myself would be held responsible."³⁶

By far the most serious administrative problem that Myer faced at both Fort Davis and Fort Duncan was obtaining and keeping a trustworthy and competent hospital steward and other helpers. This was because the army was small and line officers, particularly company commanders, believed they could ill spare even one able man for staff duty. The problem arose at Fort Davis when Myer recommended the promotion of his steward, Private Otto Bauman, to the noncommissioned rank of sergeant. Bauman's company commander resented the man's absence from his company to work in the hospital and therefore objected to the promotion. Myer contended that a steward ought to be a sergeant, for one of his duties was to maintain discipline in the post hospital, whose patients, being away from their usual officers, were likely to be "disorderly and undisciplined." Besides that, a steward, like a company first sergeant, was the assistant to the officer in charge, who in this case was the post doctor. He had to know about "books and papers," a "thousand articles of use," hospital regulations, and food preparations. He also had to care for "the wards & beds" and to know "the common forms of Medicine & their use." He had to be able to apply dressings, supervise the nurses, and learn a hundred "indications of disease," which he could learn only in the wards and under the medical officer's instruction. In short, it took months to instruct a steward properly, and if an instructed man was to be recalled to company duty, as was the case with Private August Berg, Myer's steward at Fort Duncan in July, 1856, then it was all but impossible to maintain a medical program.³⁷

General (Reels, SGO), RG 112, NA. See also table of equipment and supplies in *Regulations for the Medical Department of the Army*.

³⁶SGO to Myer, July 20, 1856 (first and second quotations); and copy of Myer to SGO, Aug. 20, 1856 (third and fourth quotations), Myer Papers, LC. Several years earlier in Charleston, South Carolina, Myer had been reluctant "to meddle" very much with the dislocated shoulder of a slave because the master had not authorized him to handle the case. Myer Diary, 1851-1857, Jan. 26, 1852, Myer Papers, SigC, Mus.

³⁷Myer Diary, 1854-1855, Feb. 5, 26, 1855, Myer Papers, SigC, Mus. Also, undated and unaddressed copy of a letter requesting Bauman's promotion (first quotation); a subse-

A whole series of frustrations followed the Berg case as Myer sought to staff his hospital at Duncan with competent personnel. Thus, for example, he was denied the assignment of one man, whom he desired as a nurse, with the admonition that it was "not contemplated that all the intelligent and best men of a company . . . should be culled from its ranks to fill the positions of Nurses and Cooks." On at least one occasion Myer complained to the acting post adjutant (while doubtless intending the shaft for the post commander) of "too cursory an Examination" of his papers.⁸⁸

Myer carried his complaints not only to post headquarters, but also to Washington. Everyone who knew the service knew that even the best available men were "notoriously disqualified" for stewardship. The system, however, even denied the choice from among these men and compelled selection from "such refuse" as was left after a company had culled its noncommissioned officers from the available material. He had in his hospital at that very moment a steward who, if he did not watch him, would administer "sweet oil instead of castor oil" and could hardly be persuaded not to administer ten ounces of medicine when the doctor had prescribed "ten drachms." In his brief experience, Myer had known one case in which he thought an ill soldier "was ruined for life by . . . an inexperienced steward" and another one (the sunstroke case previously mentioned) in which a soldier died "in two and one half hours while a Private[,] just detailed as Steward, saw his symptoms change from slight to dangerous, without dreaming of danger" or of calling the doctor "until the man was almost in the agonies of dissolution."⁸⁹

The Surgeon General's Office, which replied to Myer's complaints in mid-September, 1856, thought that Myer's correspondence, including his post letters of which he had sent copies to Washington, "very forcibly exhibit the many inconveniences under which the service suffered." It was hoped, however, that a new law, of which a copy had already been sent Myer, would remedy matters. This new law authorized the appoint-

quest, but undated, unaddressed, unsigned, and torn draft letter in which Myer complains bitterly that regulations seem to leave him in this matter at the mercy of company commanders; Myer to Assistant Adjutant General, Headquarters, Department of Texas, Aug. 3, 1856 (second sixth quotations), Myer Papers, I.C.

⁸⁸[Walworth Jenkins?] to Myer, Aug. 28, 1856 (first quotation); Myer to Jenkins, Sept. 1, 1856 (second quotation), Myer Papers, I.C.

⁸⁹Draft of Myer to Surgeon General, [Aug. 21, 1856?] (quotations); Myer to Jenkins, Aug. 1 [?] (with Jenkins's endorsement, Aug. 19, 1856), 6, 16 (in part concerning Thos. Tomkins to Myer, Aug. 10, 1856), 25, Sept. 1, 1856; [Jenkins?] to Myer, Aug. 10, 28, 1856, Myer Papers, I.C.

ment from the army's enlisted men, or the enlistment of "as many competent hospital stewards as the service may require, not to exceed one for each military post." They were to be mustered and paid "as non-commissioned staff officers, with the rank, pay and emoluments" of ordnance sergeants and were "to be permanently attached to the medical and hospital department." By June, 1857, Myer thought that "the beneficial operation" of the new law was already evident.⁴⁰

Myer could take pleasure in the solution of the problem of the hospital steward, but there were also other gratifications as, in February, 1857, he looked back upon the preceding year at Fort Duncan. His request for the repair of buildings had been approved and he had insisted that first sergeants answer sick call with the other men. Best of all, "within the year thank God," no one died who had "taken sick at the post." In fact, "everything" had gone well for him until the trouble over the hospital stewardship developed in the summer of 1856.⁴¹

Among Myer's responsibilities as a medical officer was the taking of weather observations, which had to be made three times a day (from 1843 to 1855 they had been required four times a day) because of the prevailing conviction that climate influenced disease, "especially epidemics," as Surgeon General Joseph Lovell had put it. Temperature, hygrometric readings, the force and direction of the wind, rain, if any, and the general character of the weather were to be noted on the meteorological register, a form that was supposed to be completed and sent to the Surgeon General's Office every month. His hospital steward could take the observations, but it was Myer's responsibility to supervise the work and examine and sign the monthly register. Myer submitted such reports from Fort Davis and Fort Duncan but at least twice failed to sign them at Fort Davis and in late 1856 was reproved for not giving the monthly mean of the three daily thermometric and hygrometric readings at Fort Duncan. Nevertheless, he apparently took a considerable interest in meteorology.⁴²

⁴⁰R. C. Wood to Myer, Sept. 16, 1856 (first quotation), Myer Papers, I.C.; new law of Aug. 15, 1856 (second fourth quotations), from a copy of the law pasted in the back of Myer's Diary, 1851-1857, Myer Papers, SigC Mus., with a notation in Myer's hand. War Department General Orders 19, Oct. 8, 1856, par. 1, announced this law to the army. For Myer's comment on the new law, see his "Sanitary Report" for Fort Duncan, June, 1857, in Coolidge, *Statistical Report*, III, 18 (65th quotation).

⁴¹Myer Diary, 1851-1857, Feb. 7, 1857, Myer Papers, SigC Mus.

⁴²See the excellent article by Edgar Eugene Hume, "The Foundation of American Meteorology by the United States Army Medical Department," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, VIII (Jan. May, 1940), 202-238 (quoting Lovell on p. 206); Coolidge, *Statistical*

An army officer in Myer's day, as now, often had extra duties assigned to him, and Myer was no exception. The most onerous were those of the post treasurer at Fort Duncan, from which the post commander finally relieved him in 1857. Fearful that he might be assigned this duty again, Myer urged a change in the 1847 regulations that would exempt medical officers from having "to receive the savings . . . of companies . . . sell bread tickets . . . purchase wood and hops and salt . . . superintend bakers . . . settle a hundred petty accounts," and more. Besides, as a staff officer, he felt he was subordinated unfairly in these matters to officers of the line of lesser rank. Happily for Myer and his colleagues the new regulations disposed of their complaints.⁴³

When Myer sat down to his diary in early February, 1857, to reflect upon his work of the preceding year, there was one matter that he did not even mention. Strange as it may seem in hindsight, it perhaps simply slipped his mind at the time. This was the letter he wrote Secretary of War Jefferson Davis on October 1, 1856, as the difficulties over the hospital stewardship at Fort Duncan came to an end, proposing a system of military and naval signals for the War Department's consideration. As slowly unfolding events would demonstrate, the letter was freighted with the heaviest of consequences for his future. Nevertheless, an examination of his extant papers in the Signal Corps Museum and in the Library of Congress reveals nothing dated prior to this letter—no other letter, diary entry, or any other document—excepting only a letter from one of his medical professors dated March, 1851, that even suggests he was thinking about a system of military signals.⁴⁴

Reports, II, 864, 871; III, 180-181, 381-363, 501-506; "Monthly Meteorological Reports of Medical Officer to the Surgeon General, Fort Duncan, Texas, January, 1856-June, 1857" (on microfilm), Records of the Weather Bureau, RG 27, NA. There seem to be no Fort Davis meteorological reports signed by Myer extant in RG 27, but it is evident from extant letters that he submitted reports from both Fort Davis and Fort Duncan, for which see Reds., SGO, Letters Sent, Letter Book 24 (Mar. 9, 1854-Aug. 16, 1855), including Wood to Myer, Apr. 14, 1855; Letter Book 25 (Aug. 16, 1855-Feb. 17, 1857), including Lewis A. Edwards to Myer, Nov. 26, 1856; Letters Received, 1818-1870, Box 62 ("M," Jan. 1, 1855-Feb. 29, 1860), including Myer to Lawson, Mar. 5, May 1, 1855, RG 112, NA. Except for retained sample entries, the originals of the old meteorological register, now on microfilm, have been destroyed.

⁴³Walker Jones to Myer, July 11, 1856; retained draft (dated Feb. 25, 1857) of Myer to Lawson, Mar. 1, 1857 (quotation); Wood to Myer, Mar. 21, 1856, citing the new Army Regulations, para. 185, 196, Myer Papers, LC. Also, Myer to Lawson, Aug. 6, 1856, Reds., SGO, Letters Received, RG 112, NA; Myer to Lawson, Mar. 1, 1857, Reds., AGO, Medical Officers' File, Myer, A. J. (A.S., 1854-1856), RG 91, NA, to which the Mar. 21 letter cited above was a reply.

⁴⁴Myer to Secretary of War Davis, Oct. 1, 1856 (retained copy); James Webster to [Myer], Mar. 31, 1851, Myer Papers, SigG Mus. Presumably this is the Dr. Webster who

The popular account is that seeing western Indians signal with their lances influenced Myer in the development of his signaling system; but that he ever saw Indians signal with lances appears in no adequately documented source that the writer has seen. He did see Indian smoke signals on the way to Fort Davis in 1855, however. One writer, Henry S. Taft, who knew Myer personally, wrote an especially inaccurate account, putting Myer in New Mexico in 1856 (when he was at Fort Duncan, Texas), and saying that it was in New Mexico that Myer saw Comanches signaling with their lances (whereas by the time he got to New Mexico in 1860, he had already developed his basic system). Walter Prescott Webb, in *The Great Plains*, accepted the popular view, citing as his authority (after writing to the Signal Corps in Washington), J. Willard Brown, *The Signal Corps, U.S.A., in the War of the Rebellion*, whose source is not evident. Robert M. Utley, a leading historian of the old army, exercises scholarly restraint while not entirely giving up the old belief. "It is possible," he writes, that Myer's "observations in Texas, where Apaches and Comanches used fire, smoke, and flags to transmit messages, gave him additional ideas."⁴⁹ So it may be.

In any case, all that is really known is what Myer set forth in his letter to Davis—that when preparing his dissertation in 1851 he "was led to the consideration of a system of Military and Naval Signals," that he had "delayed its announcement hitherto" because it was unnecessary and he "was unwilling to risk a failure." Now, however, he was "led to desire its consideration" after "reading of some telegraphic experiments recently and successfully made in France." This very likely was a reference to the "solar telegraph" or heliograph of the engineer Leseure of the French telegraph lines, about whose invention the *Washington Star* carried an item on August 30, 1856, a clipping of which is in a Myer diary.⁴⁹

was professor of anatomy and physiology at both Geneva College and the University of Buffalo, where, at Buffalo, Myer was one of his students.

⁴⁹Myer to Wahlen], Apr. 15, 1855, Myer Papers, LC; Henry S. Taft, "Reminiscences of the Signal Service in the Civil War," *Personal Narratives of Events in the War of the Rebellion . . . Papers Read before the Rhode Island Soldiers and Sailors Historical Society* (5th Ser., No. 9; Providence, 1899), 12-13; Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston, 1936), 81-83; J. Willard Brown, *The Signal Corps, U.S.A.*, 20-21; and Utley, *Fort Davis National Historic Site, Texas*, 13.

⁴⁹Myer to Davis, Oct. 1, 1856, Myer Papers, SigC Mus. Myer claimed that he had "for years reflected upon, elaborated and practiced privately the working of his System." George W. Lay to Casper, May 27, 1858, Copy Book, 1856-1860, [1587], Myer Papers, SigC Mus. If so, Myer must have been guarding the matter very carefully, for he does not mention it in any of his known letters to his confidant James Walden. The clipping referred to is in



Albert J. Myer, wearing the "black sombrero" and the gray coat which he donned when he felt "democratically" inclined. Daguerrotype believed to have been made in New York in October, 1854. Courtesy Signal Corps Museum, Fort Gordon, Georgia.

In his letter to Secretary Davis, Myer explained only that he proposed "to communicate between detachments of troops . . . or ships at sea," rapidly, "by day or by night, in wet or in dry weather, in fogs or sunshine," "over impassable ground, over rivers or arms of the sea." Signaling could also be over enemy-occupied ground and by secret messages. The equipment would ordinarily be light, inexpensive, and simple, and it would be "without wires or any line connecting the Stations." What the mechanics of the system were, he did not say (indeed he still had many details to work out), but in principle it was the visual system using a flag by day and a torch by night that he used in the Civil War and that we know as the wigwag system.⁴⁷

Whether or not Myer saw at that time the career possibilities for himself if his system was adopted cannot be said. In any case, Secretary Davis gave the proposal short shrift and shelved it on December 11, 1856, despite a very favorable endorsement on November 29 by Colonel Joseph G. Totten, of the Engineers. Although Myer had some further correspondence on the subject with, and on one occasion saw, Totten, who laid the matter before the new Secretary of War John B. Floyd, after Davis left the cabinet in March, 1857, Myer got no formal hearing on his proposal until 1859 when he was no longer in Texas.⁴⁸

Signaling Myer may have mulled over and medicine he surely practiced in Texas, but however much these matters occupied his waking hours, the one thing that was never far from his mind, in sickness and in health, was the prospect of his marriage to Kate Walden. Although the wedding day seems to have been set for June, 1857, it was past mid-July, 1857, before Myer could turn over his responsibilities to a replacement and leave Fort Duncan. On August 1, finally en route home, he reached Indianola, on Matagorda Bay, and arrived in New York in time to be married at Lake View, near Buffalo, on August 24, 1857.⁴⁹

Myer Diary, 1851-1857; Myer Papers, SigC Mus. On Lescurre (as spelled by the *Star*, but which is spelled differently in different sources) and his work, see "Heliographe," in [Pierre Larousse], *Nouveau Larousse Illustré: Dictionnaire universel encyclopédique* (Paris, 1902), V, 67; *ibid.* (Paris, 1962), 830; and on an 1860 "optical telegraph for . . . the French Army" by "Lescuere," David L. Woods, *A History of Tactical Communication Techniques* (Orlando, Florida, 1965), 151.

⁴⁷Myer to Davis, Oct. 1, 1856, Myer Papers, SigC Mus.

⁴⁸Totten to Myer, Dec. 15, 1856, enclosing copy of his favorable endorsement of Nov. 29, together with copy of Davis's negative endorsement of Dec. 11, on Myer to Davis, Oct. 1, 1856; Myer to Totten, Apr. 22, 1857; Totten to Myer, Nov. 9, 1857, enclosing copy of Totten to Floyd, Nov. 9, 1857, Myer Papers, SigC Mus. On the navy's lack of interest in Myer's signals because of the work of a naval board on another system, see [Isaac] Toucey to Myer, Feb. 18, 1858, *ibid.*

⁴⁹Myer Diary, 1851-1857; June, 1856; May 30, 1857, and *passim*, Myer Papers, SigC Mus.;

With Myer's marriage to Catherine Walden and with the death of her father, Ebenezer Walden, shortly after their marriage, Myer became financially secure, for old Ebenezer had been one of the financial pillars of his community. Indeed Myer's marriage brought about a profound change in his personal life, for within a short span of time he not only became a husband and father (with six children eventually), but an affluent and busy man of affairs—all in addition to being an army officer on active duty.⁵⁰

When he left Fort Duncan in the summer of 1857, Myer supposed that he would return to Texas after his sixty-day leave was up in the fall. Instead, he remained on duty in the East and, in 1859, presented his ideas of military signaling to an army board presided over by Lieutenant Colonel Robert F. Lee. The board's qualified approval of Myer's system led to field tests, to congressional authorization for the appointment of a signal officer (over the objections of Senator Jefferson Davis), and to Myer's appointment in that capacity, as a major, as of June 27, 1860.⁵¹

Myer to Irvin McDowell, Mar. 18, 1857, with endorsements; Myer to Lawson, Aug. 1, 1857, Medical Officers' File, Myer, A. J. (A.S., 1854-1859), Reels, AGO, RG 94, NA. Also, Myer to [McDowell], Mar. 18, 1857 (a draft of the letter cited above), SGO to Myer, Apr. 14, 1857; Charles McCormick to Myer, May 25, June 7, July 12, 1857; Myer to [Lawson], May 27 [28?], 1857; SGO to Myer, June 28, 1857, Myer Papers, LC. Information on Myer's wedding is from his grandson, John Walder Myer to P.J.S., Mar. 3, 1962, with enclosures.

⁵⁰On Ebenezer Walden (1777-1857), of the Walden Pond Walden's, one of the first lawyers in western New York, and a man whose wealth stemmed in part if not altogether from early investments in land on which the modern city of Buffalo stands, and on Myer's management of the Walden estate, see Schrips, "Albert James Myer," 31 ff., 174-176; "Death of Judge Walden," *Daily Republic* (Buffalo, New York), Nov. 11, 1857; *Commercial Advertiser* (Buffalo, New York), Nov. 11, 1857; "In the Matter of Estate of Ebenezer Walden Deceased. Petition for Administration, By Catherine W. Myer," filed Sept. 9, 1850, Erie County, New York, Surrogate's Court. Albert and Catherine Myer had two sons and four daughters. Albert James Myer II (1862-1923), the father of John Walder Myer, mentioned in the preceding note, was the only one of the children to marry.

⁵¹For the Lee board report, see "Report of Officers for Examination of the System of Military Signals Devised by Assistant Surgeon A. J. Meyer [sic]," Mar. 12, 1859, Reels, AGO, Letters Received, 53-L (1859), RG 94, NA. A copy of this report appears as Report No. 1 of a series of fifteen numbered reports on the examination and testing of Myer's system of signaling that make up an enclosure with Myer to Cooper, June 18, 1860, Myer Papers, SigC Mus. Davis was not opposed to Myer's system of signals, but he was opposed to adding an officer to the army staff, who doubtless would proceed to create a whole new corps or bureau. Davis declared at one point in the Senate debate: "I was willing to provide for the introduction of this system of signals into the adjutant general's corps, or into the engineer's corps, but never to provide for the creation of a new bureau, with an officer at the head of it with the rank of major." *Congressional Globe*, 36th Cong., 1st Sess., XXIX, Part 3 (June 2, 1860), 2637. Most of the language he used in the debate on the subject was not so mild. Despite such opposition, however, Congress passed a bill, approved June 21, 1860, appropriating \$2,000 for signaling apparatus and for adding a signal officer to the staff of the army with the rank of major, XII U.S. Statutes at Large 66. President James

To Surgeon General Thomas Lawson he wrote that in accepting his new appointment he simultaneously vacated his commission as an assistant surgeon. He wanted, however, "to express the interest and kind regard I shall always feel for the [Medical] Corps, and to acknowledge the uniform courtesy with which I have been treated while under Your Command." Thus Myer ended his medical career, apparently without regret but with elation at his new rank and future prospects. Why an apparently able young doctor so quickly gave up the healing arts and launched himself into a curious new endeavor of a purely military kind remains something of a mystery. Probably, however, the answer lies somewhere in the realms of ambition, personal taste, and the state of the medical profession in the 1850s.⁶²

Major Myer had hardly tested his new system of signals for the first time on an actual campaign (the Navajo Expedition of 1860-1861 in New Mexico) before the Civil War broke upon the nation. It was during that great holocaust that he created the United States Army Signal Corps.⁶³

In the 1870s Myer used the Signal Corps, or the Signal Service as it was known for many years, as the vehicle for his second great accomplishment, the development of the weather service, which upon its transfer to the Department of Agriculture in 1891 became the United States Weather Bureau. By the time of Myer's death on August 24, 1880, his twenty-third wedding anniversary, the weather service was already world renowned and Myer himself was known throughout the land as "Old Probabilities" or "Old Probs" for short.⁶⁴ The proud and dignified brigadier general and chief signal officer, now widely known, had come a long way during the years since his antebellum adventures as a young army doctor in Texas.

Buchanan and Secretary of War John B. Floyd signed Myer's commission as "Signal Officer with the rank of Major" June 28, 1860. W. A. Nichol's to Myer, June 30, 1860, enclosing commission of June 28 (effective June 27, 1860).

⁶²Myer to Lawson, July 1, 1860 (quotation), Records of the Office of the Chief Signal Officer, Letters Sent, I, No. 1, RG 111, NA. On the matter of Myer and other physicians of his day giving up medicine for purely military pursuits, see Paul E. Steiner, *Physician Generals in the Civil War: A Study in Nineteenth-Century American Medicine* (Springfield, Illinois, 1966), 13, 27, 27, 127. Steiner's biographical sketch of Myer contains some inaccuracies.

⁶³Paul J. Scheps, "Union Signal Communications: Innovation and Conflict," *Civil War History*, IX (Dec. 1963), 399-421.

⁶⁴On Myer and the weather service, see Paul J. Scheps, "Old Probabilities: A. J. Myer and the Signal Corps Weather Service," *The Arlington Historical Magazine*, V (Oct., 1974), 29-43.

