



American Battle Field Wound Dressings in WWI

Medical language can be confusing. When military medical personnel referred to a dressing, they meant the sterile gauze pads placed on a wound. To make matters worse, doctors often referred to these pads as sponges, though they didn't resemble a kitchen sponge at all. A dressing station was a place where wounds were dressed. The same is true of the dressing room in an aid station.

Three types of medical packets were used to treat wounded front-line troops in the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) during WWI. These were packaged in America, often by civilians who volunteered to work with the American Red Cross. These were known as "Front Packets".

These were packaged in kraft paper dipped in paraffin to make them waterproof. This also protected them from gas warfare chemicals. They had color-coded labels: Red, White, and Blue.

Modern readers should be aware of several limitations in WWI wound care. There are a number of things that had not been invented in WWI. These include:

1. Pre-packaged sterile gloves.
2. Plastic products. Plastic had not been invented. This meant no disposable gloves or plastic intravenous supplies.
3. Adhesive tape. This was invented in the 1920s, so there were no medical tapes to secure dressings.

One of the wound care goals in the field during WWI was to apply a dressing to the wound as soon as possible. With this in mind, each marine and soldier carried a small wound pack for his personal use. This was known as "Packet Number 1". It had a red label. He was also given a number of packaged iodine swabs for wound cleansing. He was not to use his packet on a comrade unless that man's kit was missing. Army medics and navy corpsmen carried "Packet Number 2" (white label) and "Packet Number 3" (blue label) in their medical bags along with iodine swabs, bottled iodine, morphine, and other supplies.

Since adhesive medical tape did not exist in WWI, the methods for securing a dressing in place relied on long rolls of gauze and muslin cloth to wrap around the wounded area. Muslin is cotton fabric manufactured in a plain weave. Unbleached muslin strips

were used to wrap wounds, splints, make slings, and create tourniquets. The muslin strips were secured with safety pins.

When we hear the word bandage today, many people will think of a Band-Aid or a similar adhesive product. These were invented in the 1920s. In the parlance used in WWI, a dressing consisted of the sterile gauze pads or compresses placed directly on a wound. A bandage was the means by which the dressing was held in place. The bandage usually started with a long roll of sterile gauze wrapped around the dressing and the affected body part. Then the muslin bandage held the gauze one in place and added protection for the wound.

Front Packet Number 1 (red label)

These small packets were marked with two red bands. Each included:

1. 1 unbleached muslin bandage 4-5 inches wide and 5 yards long with two 1.5-inch safety pins attached to the bandage.
2. A muslin bag that contained the following sterile items wrapped in paper:
 - a. 4 gauze sponges or wipes 4x4.5 inches
 - b. 1 absorbent pad, 4x6 inches
 - c. 1 gauze bandage, 4 inches wide (This was a roll of gauze used to encircle or wrap over the 4x4.5-inch pads. We use bandage rolls like these still. One modern brand is Kerlix.)

The recommended routine to dress a wound was:

1. Use iodine swabs to cleanse the edges of the wound if possible. Men were instructed to not attempt to cleanse the wound itself, and particularly to not try to use the iodine swabs in deep or large wounds.
2. Apply the gauze sponges or pad to the wound.
3. Wind the 4-inch gauze roll bandage around the wounded area to keep the sponges/pads in place.
4. Wrap the muslin bandage around the wounded area tightly enough to hold the dressing in place and secure the end of the muslin with the safety pins. Troops were warned not to wrap the bandage tight, since an overly tight bandage could cut off circulation to the wound and beyond.

Front Packet Number 2 (white label)

These packets were larger, using the same packaging materials with two white bands. They were carried by medics and corpsmen

for dressing medium wounds. These packs had two white stripes. Each included:

1. 1 muslin bandage and safety pins, same as Package 1.
2. A muslin bag that contains the following sterile items wrapped in paper:
 - a. 4 gauze sponges or wipes 4x4.5 inches
 - b. 1 absorbent pad ,6x8 inches.
 - c. 1 gauze bandage, 4 inches wide.

Front Packet Number 3 (blue label)

These packets were the largest carried by emergency medical personnel at the front, using the same packing materials and two blue bands. Each included:

1. 2 muslin bandages 4-5 inches wide and 5 yards in length with two 1.5-inch safety pins attached to each bandage.
2. A muslin bag that contains the following sterile items wrapped in paper:
 - a. 6 gauze compresses, 4x8 inches
 - b. 1 absorbent pad, 10x18 inches
 - c. 1 gauze bandage, 6-inches wide

These packets were also used at aid stations, dressing stations, and hospitals. Medical personnel carried supplies of front packets in duffel bags as they moved to the front.

More extensive first-aid outfits in rigid cases were used by medical personnel at dressing and aid stations.

John Frederick Andrews
Novels of the Great War

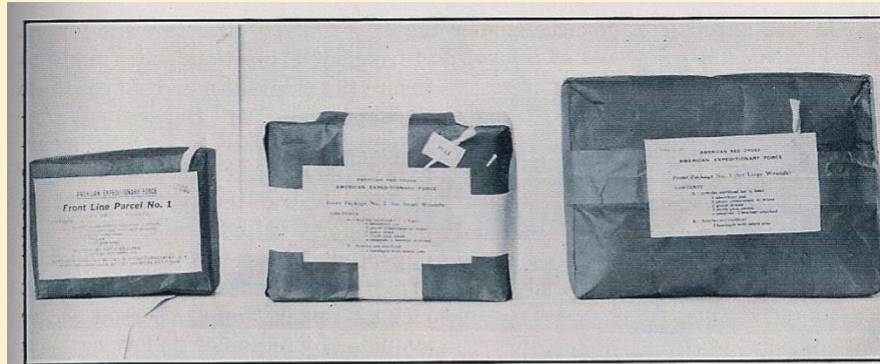


FIG. 78.—Front-line packages Nos. 1, 2, and 3

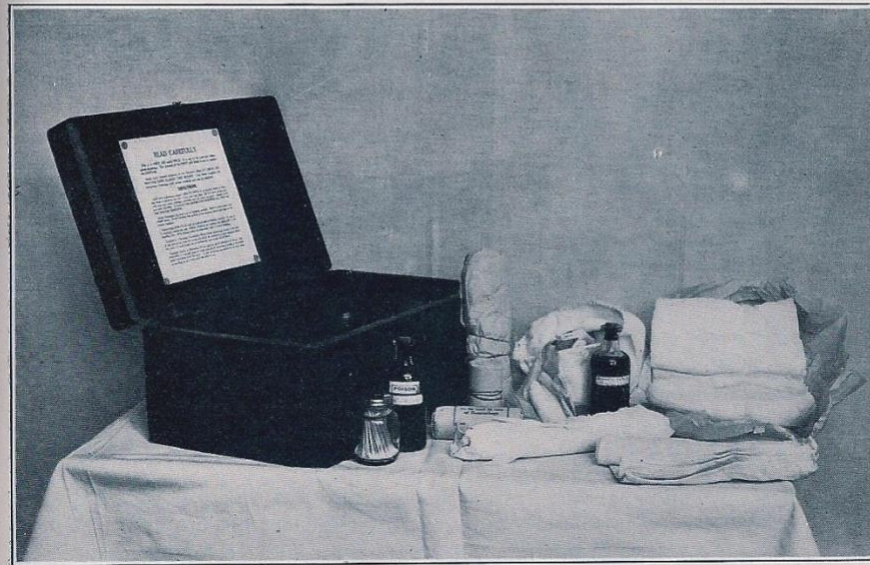


FIG. 79.—First-aid outfit, complete

From Ireland.

References:

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