



The Army Medical Department: 1917-1941 (Army Historical Series)

Mary C. Gillett

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“The Army Medical Department, 1917–1941,” completes a four-volume study covering the years from 1775 to 1941. Although the Medical Department had improved medical standards and practices because of the latest advances in scientific medicine and was making significant progress toward creating an organizational structure and a supply system able to handle the demands of a conflict of any size, its reserves of trained personnel and supplies were seriously inadequate when the nation entered World War I in the spring of 1917. The narrative first describes the struggle of an unprepared department to meet the myriad demands of a war of unprecedented size and complexity, then follows postwar efforts to meet the needs of the peacetime army during nearly two decades of continental isolationism and budgetary neglect, and finally covers the brief period of growing awareness of America’s probable involvement in another major conflict and the intensive preparation efforts that ensued. Taken together, Gillett’s four volumes provide a wealth of information on the development of the Army Medical Department and its contributions to scientific medicine. They also challenge long-standing myths that during times of crisis effective medical organizations can be created with relative ease and that the advances in one or more medical specialties do not have a deep and lasting impact on the profession’s many other fields of endeavor, from hospital organization to emergency medical procedures and evacuation policies and methods. In sum, Gillett’s four-volume compendium will be a welcome addition to command libraries of all officers responsible for the health of their soldiers while also benefiting greatly those interested in the history of military medicine. However, The Army Medical Department, 1917–1941, has a much broader application than the basic subject matter would suggest. Its major lessons tell much about how the Army continually attempts to transform itself to meet the exigencies of its ever-changing environment; underscore the impact of key leaders in times of crisis; and highlight the value of careful planning, organizational flexibility, and decisive implementation to achieve the most beneficial results.

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