

Blood and Compassion on the Battlefield

In the annals of military history there have been many cases of compassion that have been shown to an enemy by an enemy. How is it that men fighting for their lives will put aside their self-preservation to show compassion for an enemy? This is not common but extraordinary and not limited to any country or army. These are a few of many cases that show how one's humanity can overcome all else and compassion for one's fellow man can take precedence.

Mercy is not a part of any army's strategy. Combat training is about eliminating any doubts or sympathy that might make a recruit hesitate at the wrong second. When their own life and the life of everyone in the unit is at stake, there's no time to stop and ask, "But won't this soldier's family miss him?" That kind of thing gets you killed. And yet, moving stories of mercy on the battlefield do turn up all throughout history. In the most inhumane settings, sometimes humanity shines through showing it is not our nature to kill but to help our fellow man.

Fredericksburg 1862

It is December 1862 and the end of the second year of the American Civil War with no end in sight. America has torn itself in half with brother fighting brother with over 130,000 American lives lost so far. The bloody stalemate continues, and the Union tries desperately for a victory and the Confederate forces, though outnumbered, defend the southern states from invasion. In desperation to find a general that will fight Lincoln turns to Major General Ambrose Burnside to lead the Army of the Potomac. With pressure from Washington to act and poor logistics it sets the stage for one of the bloodiest and one-sided battles of the war.

On November 14th the union forces arrived across the Rappahannock River from Fredericksburg. At this time Burnside had the advantage taking the Confederate forces by surprise and unprepared for an assault on the town. Burnside's army was delayed on the north bank of the river waiting for the necessary pontoon bridges he needed to cross. After two weeks, the overdue bridge materials finally arrived but the surprise advantage was lost, and the Confederates were prepared and well entrenched. On December 11th, Union engineers laid six bridges across the Rappahannock under fire and the Union Army proceeded into the town of Fredericksburg. On December 13th, Burnside mounted a series of frontal assaults on Prospect Hill and Marye's Heights that resulted in staggering casualties for the Union Army.

Burnside's plan at Fredericksburg was to use the nearly 60,000 men in General Franklin's Left Division to crush Lee's southern flank on Prospect Hill while the rest of his army held Longstreet and the Confederate First Corps in position at Marye's Heights. The Union army's main assault against Stonewall Jackson produced initial success and held the promise of destroying the Confederate right, but lack of reinforcements and Jackson's powerful counterattack blocked the effort. Both sides suffered heavy losses.

In the meantime, Burnside's diversion against veteran Confederate soldiers behind a stone wall produced a similar number of casualties but most of these were suffered by the Union troops. Wave after wave of Federal soldiers marched forth to take the heights, but each was met with devastating rifle and artillery fire from the nearly impenetrable Confederate positions. Confederate artilleryman Edward Porter

Alexander's earlier claim that "a chicken could not live on that field" proved to be entirely prophetic this bloody day. [1]



As Federal troops formed long lines and charged up the long slope of Marye's Heights on Saturday, Dec. 13, 1862, Confederate riflemen stationed along the Sunken Road below the summit stood behind the Stone Wall and poured deadly volleys into the Union ranks. Federal troops charged five times; (Artist Allen Christian Redwood, Library of Congress)

As darkness fell on a battlefield strewn with dead and wounded, it was clear that a major Confederate victory was at hand. The Army of the Potomac suffered more than 12,500 casualties, nearly two-thirds of them in front of Marye's Heights. By comparison, Lee's army suffered some 6,000 losses. General Robert E. Lee, watching the great Confederate victory unfolding from his hilltop command post exclaimed, "*It is well that war is so terrible, or we should grow too fond of it.*" [1] During the darkness of the night the sounds of the wounded and dying filled the air along with occasional rifle shots. To add to the eerie stillness the unearthly site of the Northern lights illuminated the sky in an unusual display that far south. Lt. COL Joshua Chamberlain described the battlefield with the following, "*But out of that silence rose new sounds more appalling still; a strange ventriloquism, of which you could not locate the source, a smothered moan, as if a thousand discords were flowing together into a key-note weird, unearthly, terrible to hear and bear, yet startling with its nearness; the writhing concord broken by cries for help, some begging for a drop of water, some calling on God for pity; and some on friendly hands to finish what the enemy had so horribly begun; some with delirious, dreamy voices murmuring loved names, as if the dearest were bending over them; and underneath, all the time, the deep bass note from closed lips too hopeless, or too heroic to articulate their agony...It seemed best to bestow myself between two dead men among the many left there by earlier assaults, and to draw another crosswise for a pillow out of the trampled, blood-soaked sod, pulling the flap of his coat over my face to fend off the chilling winds, and still more chilling, the deep, many voiced moan that overspread the field.*" [2]

As the first light of day fell over the battlefield the Confederate soldiers behind the wall began to prepare for a second day of fighting. One of these men, Sergeant Richard Kirkland, 19 of South Carolina. As he looked over the wall as far as he could see were wounded and dying soldiers. Something must have gripped Kirkland in this moment where he felt he had to do something. A sense of humanity overtook him and these men on the other side of the wall were no longer his enemy. He asked his fellow soldiers for their canteens and went over the wall, away from safety into the no-man's land to lend aid to the fallen soldiers.

At first the union officers assumed he was robbing the bodies of the fallen soldiers and gave orders to fire on him. But as they watched Kirkland stop and kneel at the side of one union soldier after another it became apparent to what he was doing. Union officers and soldiers witnessing this came to grip with the reality of what they were seeing and lowered their weapons. Thousands of men from both sides witnessed this unbelievable act of compassion as he went from man to man giving water. They watched

in silence as he performed this deed. It is hard to imagine what was going through the minds of all that watched but one man acted when others did not and decided enough was enough.

The stone wall still stands today and I was privileged to walk the ground and hear the park rangers tell this story of soldier's courage on both sides that day and see the statue dedicated to Sergeant Kirkland for his willingness to act in the face of danger and great suffering. That is why he was referred to by both the North and the South as the Angel of Marye's Heights.

Kirkland went on to fight in both the Battle of Chancellorsville and the Battle of Gettysburg where, after further distinguishing himself for courage and ability, he was promoted to lieutenant. On September 20, 1863, he and two other men took command of a charge during the Battle of Chickamauga. Realizing they had advanced too far forward of their own unit, they attempted to return, and Kirkland was shot. His last words were, *"I'm done for... save yourselves and please tell my Pa I died right."* [3]



Photo by Warren Kaye, Fredericksburg National Battlefield

In 1965, local citizens petitioned the state legislatures of Virginia and South Carolina to construct a monument to Kirkland's memory. Today it stands at the northeast corner of Mercer Street and Sunken Road, a rare testimony to man's humanity to man. [3]

Gettysburg 1863

After his success at Chancellorsville in Virginia in May 1863, Lee led his army through the Shenandoah Valley to begin his second invasion of the North. With his army in high spirits, Lee intended to shift the focus of the summer campaign from war ravaged northern Virginia and hoped to influence Northern politicians to give up their prosecution of the war by penetrating as far as Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, or even Philadelphia. Urged by President Abraham Lincoln, General Hooker moved his army in pursuit, but he was relieved of command just three days before the battle and replaced by General George Meade.

Elements of the two armies initially collided at Gettysburg on July 1, 1863, as Lee urgently concentrated his forces there, his objective being to engage the Union army and destroy it. Low ridges to the northwest of town were defended initially by a Union cavalry division and soon reinforced with two corps of Union infantry. However, two large Confederate corps assaulted them from the northwest and north, collapsing the hastily developed Union lines, sending the defenders retreating through the streets of the town to the hills just to the south.

On the second day of battle, most of both armies had assembled. The Union line was laid out in a defensive formation resembling a fishhook. In the late afternoon of July 2, Lee launched a heavy assault

on the Union left, and fierce fighting raged at Little Round Top, the Wheatfield, Devil's Den, and the Peach Orchard. Across the battlefield, despite significant losses, the Union defenders held their lines. It was during one of these assaults on the second day of battle Colonel Joseph Wasden, of the 22nd Georgia Infantry was killed by a canister shot while leading his men near the Codori Farm on the Emmitsburg Pike. [4]

While this action was taking place, the men of the 2nd Rhode Island Infantry which was part of the Union Army of the Potomac's 6th Corp was just completing a forced epic march of 38 miles in 17 hours to reach the battle. For the previous couple of weeks, it had been moving shadowing the Army of Northern Virginia staying between Lee's army and Washington waiting for a time to engage. The arrival of the 6th Corps gave on the Union Army a boost to its moral. The 6th Corp was the Army of the Potomac's largest Corp with over 16,000 men. It arrived during the heat of the action on July 2nd it is believed that if the confederate forces over ran Little Round Top that day they only would have run straight into the full brunt of the 6th Corp. 6th Corp took up support locations to reinforce the Union lines in a hollow to the North of Little Round Top. A marker is located there now on the battle field.

During July 3 the 2nd Rhode Island was used a reinforcement and moved several times to different locations on the battle field but were never fully engaged. At the end of the day of July 3rd the 2nd Rhode Island was moved to an advanced point on the Emmitsburg Pike near the Codori Farm. This is when the paths of Colonel Joseph Wasden and Captain Thomas Foy would cross. Foy was one the members to join Company H on June 5, 1861 as a member of the Kentish Guards of Rhode Island. [5]

The following is an account of Captain Foy at Gettysburg given by Augustus Woodbury in his book on the 2nd Rhode Island Regiment.



Captain Thomas Foy Kentish Guards Archives

To understand the depths of the commitment to decently inter members of the Masonic Order, it is necessary to examine the case of Colonel Joseph Wasden, of the 22nd Georgia Infantry. In his diary, Augustus Woodbury, of the 2nd Rhode Island, describes what he witnessed. *“An interesting incident occurred immediately after the battle of Gettysburg, which seems deserving of record. The Regiment was lying in the road, supporting the sharp-shooters.... The enemy's dead were scattered over the field. One of the men of Company C, learning, in some way, that Captain Foy was a member of the Masonic order, brought to him a diploma, bearing the name of Joseph Wasden, and issued by Franklin Lodge, Warrenton, Warren County, Georgia. It had been taken from the body of a colonel of a Georgia regiment, which was lying in the road, at a short distance from the position of the Regiment. Considering it his duty, as a Masonic brother, to see that the last rites were properly and decently performed, Captain Foy took with him Corporal Stalker and a detail of two or three men, proceeded to the place, carefully wrapped the body in a blanket, dug a grave in the field nearby, under the sharp fire of the enemy's riflemen, and tenderly and reverently deposited the corpse of the fallen brother therein. A green leaf of corn supplied*

the place of the customary acacia, and the soul of the departed was commended to its God. It was a graceful and fraternal act and was well and considerately performed.” [5]

Men who were bitter enemies fighting in the most significant battle of the Civil War were able to put aside the bitterness, anger, and hatred and show compassion for a fallen brother and gave him the respect as he saw his duty.

Germany 1943

Humanity is usually the first casualty during war. Ethics and morals are a distant memory when it is life and death at the hands of an enemy, but this is not always the case. Even in the time of death and destruction man's humanity for man can shine through. This is the account of a German Luftwaffe fighter pilot Lt. Franz Stigler on December 20th, 1943. His actions were responsible for getting nine US Airmen home for Christmas.

Charlie Brown of the USAAF was a Lieutenant flying his first mission as an aircraft commander flying a B-17 named “Ye Olde Pub” on a bombing run over Bremen, Germany. Brown's bomber occupied the especially dangerous left edge of the formation, sometimes called the Coffin Corner. [6,7] Bremen was a heavily defended city due to its industrial complex by a large contingent of fighters and anti-aircraft batteries. Two B-17s in the formation were quickly struck by anti-aircraft fire and went down during the bomb run. Brown's bomber was hit by flak and the front of the bomber was almost sheared off and sustained damage to engines 2 and 4. The crew had to shut them down, which took the bomber out of the formation. Soon they were met by about fifteen enemy fighters and bullets tore through the thin skin of the aircraft.

The tail gunner was killed as large sections of the tail were shot apart. Nine more crewmen were now injured, some very badly wounded. The electrical, hydraulic and oxygen systems were all damaged. Then Brown was hit in the shoulder with shrapnel. The men that were seriously wounded had little reprieve as the morphine syringes were frozen. Oxygen deprivation and a wounded shoulder caused Brown to black out momentarily as the bomber spiraled towards the earth. [7] Seeing this the German fighters must have broken off figuring the bomber was going down and going to crash. When Brown regained consciousness his first memory was that of dodging trees.

Brown was able to regain some altitude just as German pilot Franz Stigler was refueling and rearming at an airfield nearby. Stigler saw the bomber and quickly flew up to meet it. Stigler was a veteran pilot who would eventually fly in over 400 combat missions in nearly every front of the war. Flying the Me 109, Stigler was one bomber kill away from earning the high honor of the Knight's Cross. [6] Stigler flew behind the bomber observing it and waiting for the tail gunner to raise his guns. Seeing the limp rear guns, he moved closer and saw the massive amount of damage to the aircraft. Bullet holes riddled the entire aircraft. Stigler knew that most of the men had to be badly wounded or dead. Stigler at that instant recalled the words of a commanding officer, “*Honor is everything here. If I ever see or hear of your shooting a man in a parachute, I will shoot you myself. You follow the rules of war for you, not for your enemy. You fight by rules to keep your humanity.*” Stigler would later note, “*To me, it was just like they were in a parachute. I saw them in this condition and I couldn't shoot them down.*” [6]

Stigler flew up to be next to the bomber's cockpit and he and Brown looked at each other for a moment. Brown figured this was it but instead Stigler motioned to him to land, and failing that, fly to Sweden which was a neutral country. Brown was having none of that, wounded and from lack of oxygen he

could only focus on getting back to England. Stigler had no way to give Brown verbal commands, only gesturing. Seeing that the bomber was heading towards England, Stigler had every opportunity to shoot them down. Instead, he escorted the bomber to the open ocean. Stigler not knowing if the bomber's navigation systems were working looked at Brown and pointed in the direction of England. He then saluted Brown and turned back for Germany. Stigler would never speak of his actions during the war. Had he done so he fully believed that he would have been court-martialed or worse. B-17s were hated by the Germans, they dropped massive amounts of bombs wreaking havoc on cities and often took out several enemy fighters with their array of guns. Stigler's humanity could be appreciated but likely not during the war.

About forty years later Charlie Brown was living in the United States after a long career in the US Air Force. Brown happened to recant his tail of that fateful day over Germany to a group of veterans. His story was published in many aviation magazines and articles written of the events of that fateful day. Brown had always had a desire to find the pilot that spared him and his crew but figured it would be futile. He was not even sure if the pilot survived the war. Franz Stigler had moved to Canada after the war and became a successful businessman. One day Stigler happened to read the story and decided to contact Brown. Brown had a very hazy memory of the whole incident and was heartened to find the German who spared him and his crew and help fill in rest of the memories and make sure it was not a dream. After a lengthy phone call where Stigler filled in the blanks of the story and proved he was the right one, the two met in person. They hit it off splendidly and became good friends until their deaths.

Both felt that they should tell their story to as many people as would hear it, not for money but to make people realize that there's always another way, that the world could be infinitely better than it was. Stigler and Brown both had heart attacks and died in 2008, six months apart. Stigler was 92; Brown, 87.

[7]

In their obituaries, each was listed to the other as "a special brother."



Brown

Stigler

Brandywine 1777

Patrick Ferguson was a Scottish Officer in British Army who was a promoter of light infantry tactics and the designer of the Ferguson rifle. He designed a breechloading mechanism taken from one already used in sporting guns and improved it for use in a military rifle. He tested this rifle at his own expense and submitted it to the British army. With such a weapon, light infantry troops would be able to continue loading and firing without breaking cover or while lying on the ground. [8] Appointed Captain Commandant of his own corps, armed with Ferguson rifles, he was sent to North America in spring 1777.

The green-clad rifle company served in New Jersey, before sailing to the Chesapeake in August 1777 to take part in Howe's campaign to capture Philadelphia. In their only major engagement at Brandywine on 11 September 1777, Ferguson had the chance to shoot a senior looking Rebel officer, who was riding out with a French hussar as escort, but, as he later wrote, the idea of shooting someone in the back who was going about his duties so coolly, and did not pose a threat, "disgusted" him. [8] Even when told next day that the officer in question was Washington, he did not regret his chivalry. It was moments after sparing these horsemen that Ferguson was gravely wounded shot through the right elbow. It took him almost a year to recover from his injuries.

He went on to serve in the Southern campaign during the revolution where he gained a reputation as a hard fighting tenacious officer. In October 1780 he was surrounded by rebels near King's Mountain and was killed in an engagement. [9] So, in some sense it might be said the man that saved the American Revolution was a British sharpshooter whose personal morals and principals guided him from losing his humanity in combat even in the face of the enemy.

Over the centuries there have been countless examples of mercy or compassions shown to an enemy. Humans can commit terrible atrocities against our fellow man or can show incredible acts of kindness and compassion. In ages past perhaps there was more of a code of chivalry that governed men in battle, but throughout history men have proven themselves to be as equally cruel or compassionate. I personally believe it is within everyone to decide how they conduct themselves in given situations. As Stigler's commanding officer told him, "*You follow the rules of war for you not your enemy for you need to live with yourself when it is over.*" World War I had countless acts where pilots spared other pilots that were helpless on both sides with stories from Eddie Rickenbacker and Manfred von Richthofen. The Christmas truce of 1914 was yet another example. There is yet another story of Japanese pilot that saved and American aviator that had parachuted out of his plane. This might seem odd as the Japanese we known for shooting pilots that bailed out of planes. Later the two men met, and the Japanese pilot revealed why he did what he did on that day. It was due to his commanding officer encouraged him and his fellow pilots to observe the real Bushido code (not the one corrupted by the Japanese military), which espoused graciousness towards one's enemy.

Mercy spans all races, religions, countries it is up to the individual soldier regardless of what army or nation they sever to display honor, courage, and compassion when needed or warranted to maintain one's humanity.

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