

Freemasonry During Wartime

By: Bro. Richard E. Shields, Jr.

Bro. Shields is a member of Waxhaw Lodge #562, Waxhaw, NC. His interest in the subject of Freemasonry during wartime was sparked by Allen Roherts and his writings, particularly "House Undivided."

The book Befriend and Relieve Every Brother, Freemasonry During Wartime was just recently reviewed by both The Northern Light and The Scottish Rite Journal. This Short Talk Bulletin was extracted from that book.

FRIEND TO FRIEND

General Lew Armistead vaulted the stone wall, yelled "give them cold steel" and headed for the cannons that had until recently been firing on his men. As he laid his hand on one of the guns of the 4th US Artillery, the 69th Pennsylvania Infantry fired upon the gray coated General and the men who had followed him. Many went down including Armistead. He was heard to cry for help "as the son of a widow." Colonel Rawley W. Martin of the 53rd Virginia lay near by and witnessed as some of the men of the 69th Pa. rose up and came to Armistead's aid. Captain Henry H. Bingham, a physician and Mason, was brought to assist Armistead. Armistead inquired about his friend and Masonic Brother General Winfield Hancock. Learning that Hancock had also been wounded, he entrusted to Bingham his Masonic watch and personal papers to give to his friend and Brother General Hancock. Hancock and Armistead had attended West Point and had fought in the same regiment in Mexico, and were the closest of friends prior to the war. Two days later Armistead died of his wounds in a Union hospital on the Spangler farm.

Bingham survived the war and in fact won a Congressional Medal of Honor in 1867. He retired in 1867 and went on to become a member of the United States Congress where he served for 33 years. He died in 1912 at the age of 70.

General Hancock survived his wounds though it was a long time until he returned to the army. He later commanded the Department of the East of the United States Army and died in 1886 still in command. In 1880, he lost an attempt for the United States Presidency to James Garfield.

This incident of the famous charge at Gettysburg known as Pickett's Charge is only one of many incidents in history where one Mason has come to the aid of another or another's family and has inspired the Masonic "Friend to Friend" Monument at Gettysburg.

MASONIC BURIAL BY THE ENEMY

On June 11, 1863, the Federal gunboat Albatross, with Lt. Commander J.E. Hart of St. George's Lodge #6 in New York in command, was anchored on the Mississippi River opposite the town of Bayou Sara (some accounts say St. Francisville) which was 15 miles above the Rebel fortification Port Hudson. The gunboat was part of the ships laying siege to Port Hudson, Louisiana. Commander Hart had been in a delirium for many days and was confined to quarters. A shot rang out and the ship's executive officer Theodore E. Dubois and the doctor found the commander dead. The officers of the ship, not wanting to bury their commander in the river, sent a flag of truce ashore to discover if there was a local Masonic Lodge. William W. Leake, the acting Master of the lodge in Bayou Sara was approached by Captain Samuel White, who lived near the river, to hold a Masonic funeral for Commander Hart. Brother Leake replied, "As a soldier of the Confederate Army, I think it is my duty. As a Mason, I know it is my duty." On June 13th, a few members of the local lodge in Masonic regalia gathered and met the procession of 50 men from the Albatross under a flag of truce at the top of a hill. Brothers Benjamin F. and Samuel F. White of Bayou Sara, the surgeon and the two officers of the gunboat who were Masons were in the procession along with a squad of marines at "trail arms." Leake and the local Brothers marched in front of the corpse to Grace Episcopal Church Cemetery and buried Brother Hart in the Masonic Section with military and Masonic honors with the service of the Episcopal Church read over him. Brother Leake led the Masonic part of the services. The US Surgeon and officers asked the Brothers to join them on the Albatross for dinner but they declined. The surgeon then offered to supply Brother Leake with medicines for his family. Brother Leake declined but later the surgeon sent a few medicines to Leake through Brother Samuel White.

Hart's grave was marked with a wooden head plate for many years, and eventually a permanent marker covering the whole grave was dedicated. The marker states: "This monument is dedicated in loving tribute to the universality of Freemasonry."

HIS PLEASURE TO GIVE THEM RELIEF

Toward the end of the Civil War a number of Confederate prisoners of war were being held in the vicinity of Winchester, Virginia, where they were guarded by a regiment of Ohio troops. One afternoon a young major accompanied the regimental surgeon on his hospital rounds among the prisoners.

The young officer noticed that although the surgeon stopped at each bed, at some he gave tobacco, sometimes some money which he peeled from a large roll in his pocket and to others, advice that had nothing to do with the patient's medical condition. The major's curiosity was raised as to why this surgeon would give aid over and above what was expected to the dirty, ragged prisoners. The surgeon replied that he was a Mason and that since the wounded prisoners were Masons, "it was not only his duty but also his pleasure to relieve their wants to the limit of his ability, regardless of their rank or condition."

The major, touched by these actions, expressed a wish to become a Mason. At that period of time, many lodges ignored jurisdictional lines or length of residence. Later these actions would cause many headaches for the various Grand Lodges but at this point were just part of the war. Thus, Hiram Lodge #21 of Winchester elected him to receive the degrees which he proceeded to do.

The lodge had had a fluctuating membership for the past 4 years since the town was constantly changing hands as the armies moved up and down the Shenandoah Valley. At times, the Federals had a majority in the lodge and at other times the Confederates did. After the final defeat of the Confederate Army at Cedar Creek in October, 1864, things finally settled down, and the lodge looked again to hold meetings while under Northern occupation. In order to do so, Brothers Brent and Legge received a letter of introduction to General Phil Sheridan from the Honorable Montgomery Blair of Baltimore Postmaster General in President Abraham Lincoln's cabinet. With this letter of introduction, they were able to get an audience with General Sheridan. When they met with the general, he was surrounded by his staff and orderlies. After showing their credentials, the Brothers stated their purpose was to ask for permission to reopen the Masonic Lodge. General Sheridan, in view of his known political and religious affiliations, turned them down. At that point, Dr. C.H. Allen, a surgeon on Sheridan's staff and a member of Aurora Lodge #22 Montpelier, Vermont, supported the Brothers with the argument that it would be a wise idea to reopen the Lodge since it would give the Northern officers and soldiers something to do while they were encamped around Winchester. This would allow the army to mingle with the townsfolk in a fraternal way and promote goodwill. Dr. Allen stated that he was a Mason and he would personally attend every meeting to see that nothing malicious towards the United States Government occurred at the meetings. Reluctantly, Sheridan gave his permission. The lodge resumed meeting on November 28, 1864. From that point to June 24, 1865, 231 men were raised in the lodge. Almost all of them were from the North.

At the time the Major's petition was acted on, a Confederate Chaplain, J.B.T. Reed was Master, and he conferred the First Degree upon the candidate on the evening of May 1, 1865. The next forenoon he was instructed by the brethren on that degree and that evening he received the Second Degree. On the morning of May 3rd, he was instructed on that degree and raised a Master Mason at 3 o'clock that afternoon.

Shortly thereafter the war ended, and the Ohio troops were sent home. The Major took a demit from Hiram Lodge and upon reaching home deposited it in Canton Lodge #60, Canton, Ohio.

For the rest of his life William McKinley took an interest in Masonic activities and did not lose his interest even when he became Governor and later, President. His last Masonic act was to place a sprig of acacia on the casket of Brother George Washington upon the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the death of the "Father of the Country."

THE FINAL ACT BY A MASON IN THE CIVIL WAR

It was an April morning three days after General Robert E. Lee had surrendered to General U.S. Grant. The Southern troops, led by General John B. Gordon, a Mason, were marching in columns towards the Northern troops who were standing in formation waiting for the Southerners to stack arms and fold their flags. Suddenly a shifting of arms was heard. Gordon looked up with alarm, but there was nothing to fear. General Joshua Chamberlain had ordered his troops to assume the position of "honor answering honor." Immediately, the Confederate troops snapped to attention and returned the honor. It was the first act to heal the wounds of a nation that had spent four years and 618,000 lives in a civil war. That command of "honor answering honor" was ordered by a Mason.

Major General Joshua Chamberlain was a member of United Lodge #8, Brunswick, Maine. After the war, he became Governor of Maine from 1866-71 and President of Bowdoin College from 1871-83. (He is also featured in the movie "Gettysburg" for his role in holding Little Round Top.)

For more information about the book Freemasonry During Wartime please contact:

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