

A Hero in the Night

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I shan't forgit the night
When I dropped be'ind the fight
With a bullet where my belt-plate should 'a'
been.
I was chokin' mad with thirst,
An' a man spied me first
Was our good old grinnin', gruntin' Gunga Din.
'E lifted up my 'ead,
An' he plugged me where I bled,
An' 'e guv me 'arf-a-pint o' water green.
It was crawlin' and it stunk,
But of all the drinks I've drunk,
I'm gratefulest to the one from Gunga Din.¹

Rudyard Kipling

When writing histories about war, most historians focus on the battles fought between the opposing sides; few give account of what happened after the gunfire ended. The Battle of Fredericksburg exhibits one of the cruelest days of warfare that Americans have ever seen. If one studied only the actual engagement of Fredericksburg, he would miss a great act of heroism by a Confederate soldier.

Commander of the Army of the Potomac, General Ambrose Burnside and his officers, General Edwin Sumner and General Joseph Hooker, stood on the balcony of the Phillips House and surveyed the town of Fredericksburg, Virginia.² In the two mile region in front of the Phillips House, ran the Rappahannock River.³ On the other side of the river was the urban center of Fredericksburg whose population of five thousand had been replaced by one hundred and fifty thousand Union soldiers.⁴ Circling the southern half of the town was a field. This barren ground rose gradually about fifty feet.⁵ At the top of the rise was an old road worn from its many years of wagons traversing upon it. In order to prevent further erosion, citizens of Fredericksburg reinforced the sides of the sunken road with stone. Within this sunken stone road, Confederate soldiers held their position.⁶

After surveying the theater of operation Burnside

discussed with Sumner and Hooker the best plan of attack. By eight o'clock, the morning of 13 December 1862, the Generals had sent the battle plan to Union officers; the officers were to lead their troops in a frontal attack against Rebel lines.⁷ General William A. French's division was to lead the attack on the sunken road supported by Generals Winfield Hancock and Oliver Howard.⁸

As French's division emerged from the town onto the barren plain they knew that they were doomed.⁹ The eight hundred yard stretch between the edge of the town and the Rebel front at the sunken road was impenetrable. The Confederate infantrymen barricaded behind the sunken road had an unobstructed view of the approaching Union soldiers. As the Union soldiers emerged from the town, their brothers from the South rested their guns on the wall, aimed the barrels at the enemy and began to fire.¹⁰

Undaunted by their hopeless position, Union soldiers gallantly proceeded with the attack. French's division formed into three lines and began their march to the sunken road. As the Union soldiers charged up the hill toward the sunken road, the Confederates continually pummeled them with gunfire. Large gaps formed in the lines and within a few minutes French's division was reduced from six thousand to fifteen hundred.¹¹

The Irish Brigade under the direction of General Hancock was sent to support French's dwindling position. These men who had survived the Siege of Yorktown, the Battle of Seven Pines, the Second Battle of Bull Run, and "Bloody Lane" at Antietam, would find their demise on the field at Fredericksburg.¹² The hail storm of Confederate bullets from behind the stone wall was too strong for these Union veterans.¹³ For six long hours the Confederate soldiers successfully defended their land from the invading enemy.

As nightfall set upon the battlefield, the fighting stopped. Union dead and wounded were left where they fell. Moaning and crying of the wounded

replaced the sounds of gunfire on the hill. The Confederate soldiers tried to ignore the anguished cries of the Union soldiers they had shot down a few hours earlier.

Whether he felt guilt from slaying his fellow man or had sympathy for the dying souls a few feet away, a young Confederate infantryman scaled the stone wall in order to relieve the suffering of those attacking his country. Nineteen-year-old, Richard Kirkland received permission from his commanding officer to relieve the fallen Union soldiers of their agony. Kirkland knew that once he emerged from behind the stone wall he would be exposing himself to Union and Rebel fire, but the cries for help were

too great. Kirkland climbed the wall and gave water to the Union soldiers who laid dying on the battlefield. When the Rebel and Union sharpshooters guarding the battlefield saw that Kirkland was comforting the fallen soldiers they ceased their fire, allowing the young man to provide relief to the wounded.¹⁴ Most historians do not account for the actions of Richard Kirkland in their writings; they rather focus on the movements of the troops and the horrors of the day. From this awful December day, one should not overlook the bravest man in the Battle of Fredericksburg. Richard Kirkland risked his own life in order to provide comfort to his wounded enemies.

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Endnotes

¹ Rudyard Kipling, "Gunga Din," *Rudyard Kipling's Verse: Definitive Edition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1940) 404-406.

² "The Battle of Fredericksburg," *New York Times*, 17 December 1862, p.1.

³ Edward J. Stackpole, *Drama on the Rappahannock: the Fredericksburg Campaign* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: The Stackpole Company, 1962), 108.

⁴ *New York Times* 1; Stackpole, *Fredericksburg Campaign*, 266.

⁵ *New York Times*, 1.

⁶ Ian Lowe, Sunken Road (information-on-line) (Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, accessed 2/21/97); available from <http://222.nps.gov/frsp/sunken.htm>; internet.

⁷ *New York Times*, 1.

⁸ Edwin V. Sumner, "Report of Major General Edwin V. Sumner, U.S. Army, commanding Right Grand Division," in *War of the Rebellion Official Records of Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1888), 219.

⁹ Darius N. Couch, "Report of Major General Darius N. Couch, U.S. Army, commanding Second Army Corps," in *War of the Rebellion Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington D.C., Government Printing Office, 1888), 222.

¹⁰ *New York Times*, 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹² Thomas E. Rice, "Desperate Courage," *Civil War Times*, November/December 1990, 58, 62.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁴ Lowe, *Sunken Road*, <http://www.nps.gov/frsp/sunken.htm>.