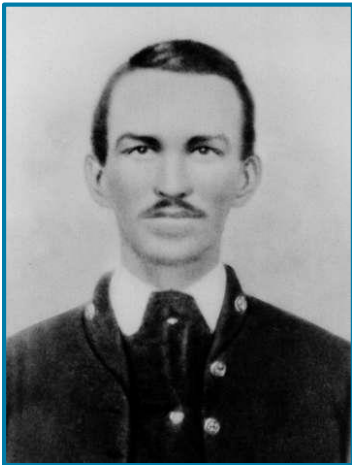


The Angel of Marye's Heights

It was 11 days before Christmas. Peace and good will were far from the thoughts of 200,000 Union and Confederate soldiers facing each other across the broad, blood-spattered area near Fredericksburg, Virginia, on Dec. 14, 1862. The past few days had been gruesome, with more than 12,000 soldiers killed.

On this day, as the sun rose, its light revealed that more than 8,000 Union soldiers had been shot in front of the stone wall at Marye's Heights. Many of those remaining on the battlefield were still alive, but suffering terrible wounds – unable to retreat to the Union field hospital – and a lack of water. Soldiers from both sides were forced to listen to the painful cries of the wounded for hours, with neither side daring to venture out for fear of being shot by the enemy.



Sgt. Richard Kirkland, a 19-year-old soldier with Company E of Kershaw's Second South Carolina Brigade, had seen enough. Kirkland went to see Confederate Gen. Joseph Kershaw. "General," he said, "I can't stand this!" The remark startled his commanding officer.

"All night and all day, I hear those poor Federal people calling for water," Kirkland said, "and I can't stand it any longer. I ask permission to go and give them water."

Gen. Kershaw shook his head sympathetically. "Sergeant," he replied, "you'd get a bullet through your head the moment you stepped over the stone wall onto the plain."

"Yes, sir," answered Kirkland. "I know that, but if you let me, I'm willing to try it."

The general was moved. He responded, "The sentiment which prompts you is so noble that I will not refuse your request. God protect you. You may go."

Quickly, the South Carolinian hurdled the wall and immediately exposed himself to the fire of every Yankee sharpshooter in that sector. Kirkland walked calmly toward the Union lines until he reached the nearest wounded soldier. Kneeling, he took off his canteen and gently lifted the enemy soldier's head to give him a long, deep drink of refreshing cold water. Then he placed a knapsack under the head of his enemy and moved on to the next.

Racing against the lengthening shadows of a short, somber December afternoon, he returned again and again to the lines where comrades handed him full canteens. Troops on both sides who watched this unselfish act paid young Kirkland the supreme tribute – not a standing ovation, but respectful, awed silence.

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For his heroism, Kirkland became known as the Angel of Marye's Heights. He went on to fight in both the battles of Chancellorsville and Gettysburg, further distinguishing himself for his courage and ability. He was fatally shot in the Battle of Chickamauga. His last words were, "I'm done for ... save yourselves and please tell my Pa I died right."



In the midst of the horrors of war, of man's inhumanity to man, Kirkland's acts of love and care inspire us. His story is a reminder that we are all travelers on this journey called life.

And while the great majority of the human race won't find themselves in a shooting war, each of us faces battles of one kind or another; some that could result in a cry of desperation, either verbally or through our actions, for help. Recognition and response define our character. We are, after all, God's workmanship, and we should treat each other with respect and dignity.

So God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them (Genesis 1:27 NIV).

– Beecher Hunter