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Casual collections on the American Civil War

Did the Fraternal Organization of Freemasonry Influence the Actions of Soldiers During The Civil War?

These are findings from my years of informal investigations of United States Army records and documents gathered from various sources. Their authenticity is not guaranteed nor verified, but the content makes for thought provoking reading.—Ed.

During the period of 1861-65 in the American Civil War, many events took place on and around the various battlefields. The fraternity of Freemasonry was an organization to which soldiers of both the Confederacy and the Union belonged.

According to an account written by John Hovey who was investigating some Union Army records, the following occurred at the Battle of Gettysburg: "This battle, the turning point in the war, saw 93,000 Federal troops doing battle with 71,000 Confederates. Of these numbers, more than 35,000 were killed or wounded in the three days of fighting from July 1 to July 3, 1863. Of the men who fought, 17,930 were Freemasons, including the roughly 5,600 who became casualties."

Hovey goes on to describe an event during and after "Pickett's Charge." "One of the men leading the charge was Brigadier General Lewis Addison Armistead, CSA. He was a member of Alexandria-Washington Masonic Lodge #22 in Alexandria, Virginia." Armistead had attended West Point, serving in the US Army before resigning and joining the Confederacy. General Armistead led his men and upon jumping over the wall, headed for the cannons that had been firing on his men. As he touched one of the cannons, it was fired. Many soldiers fell including Armistead. "He was heard to cry for help," as the son of a widow." "Colonel Rawley W. Martin of the 53rd Virginia lay nearby and witnessed as some of the men of the 69th Penna. rose up and came to Armistead's aid." Some of the Union soldiers tried to hasten Armistead's demise but were immediately stopped and chastised by other Union soldiers who were Masons. These men protected and ministered to Armistead until the surgeon arrived. Captain Henry H. Bingham, who was a physician and Mason, came to assist Armistead. Armistead asked if his friend and Masonic Brother General Winfield Scott Hancock had also been wounded. He gave his Masonic watch and personal papers to Bingham to give to his friend and Brother, General Hancock. Two days later, Armistead died of his wounds in a Union hospital on the Spangler farm.

FROM THE EDITOR

I would like to encourage all Sir Knights to submit articles, letters, pictures, or comments for inclusion in this supplement. Articles need to be submitted to me by the 25th of the month for the next issue (April 25th For June issue)

"In the battle for Galveston, Texas a young Union naval officer, Lieutenant Commander J. E. Hart, who was a Mason, was killed on board one of the Union vessels anchored in the Mississippi River. An armistice was sought and given for his burial at sea. His father, a Confederate officer, attended the funeral on board."

"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 Bayou Sara Lodge, who lived near the river, was approached by Captain Samuel White, and asked to hold a Masonic Burial 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 13, 1863, a few members of the local lodge in Masonic regalia, met the procession of 50 men including a squad of US Marines from the Federal gunboat, USS Albatross under a flag of truce at "trail arms." The procession continued and proceeded to bury Brother Hart in the Masonic Section of the cemetery with full military and Masonic honors.

In this excerpt taken from *Memoirs of a Southern Woman "Within the Lines" and a Genealogical Record* by Mary Polk Branch, in 1911, on page 41 she describes an account written by her mother, niece of General Leonidas Polk, CSA: "On December 15, 1864, I started for the plantation in Arkansas with my nurse and small family to see my husband. The plantation was in Federal lines. Next we stopped at Helena, where General Buford of Kentucky, who was in command and noted for his petty tyranny, refused to let me proceed farther. I pleaded and then wept, but soon restrained my tears when I noticed the expression of his face. He was indignant and replied, "Madam, my refusal was in kindness, as I was a West Pointer with your Uncle Leonidas, but now you return to Memphis on the first boat that lands here." For seven weeks we remained in Memphis at the Gayosa Hotel. At last on Christmas Day we were permitted to leave. I went with my aunt, Mrs. Andrew Polk, to headquarters to ask a pass to proceed down the river, my second attempt. The general was absent, but the officer in command very sternly refused to give it to me, saying the general had left such orders in regard to all applications. I thought it hopeless, and was preparing sadly to leave, when, all at once, there was such a transformation, such a desire to assist, such kindness! My astonishment was great. My aunt was a beautiful and charming woman, but that had no influence upon the officer at first. What was the magic? All at once a light broke upon me. I exclaimed, "I understand, you are a Mason, you have taken three degrees, and your father, Mr. Van Leer, was past grand master of the State!" The accounts of these actions speak well to the influence of Freemasonry. It obviously has ties, which reach beyond many boundaries and duties of loyalty in both peace and war.