

The Angel of Marye's Heights



Richard Rowland Kirkland, known as "The Angel of Marye's Heights", (August 1843 – 20 September 1863)

The history and traditions of our country are rich in examples of great heroism and patriotism. These great examples are mirrored at every turn in our country's national experience. One such example comes to us from a period of great suffering and sadness as our nation underwent the tortuous ordeal of War...a war that pitted brother against brother and father against son - the great War Between the States.

Richard Kirkland was a young South Carolina Confederate volunteer of 18 years of age at the beginning of the War. He fought in most of the major battles early in the War from First Manassas to Fredricksburg and, later, Chickamauga.

Serving under Colonel Kershaw at Fredricksburg, Sergeant Richard Kirkland found himself a member of Company G of the South Carolina Regiment of Kershaw's Brigade. The Union Army of the Potomac under the inept command of General Ambrose Burnside had crossed the Rappahanock River and was massed before the Virginia city of Fredricksburg. That city, having refused surrender by its mayor, was destroyed by the heavy Union guns which thundered against its defenseless buildings.

The company of which Kirkland was a member was assigned a defense position along the base of a large and prominent hill called Marye's Heights. Marye's Heights was a formidable tactical position as the artillery of Confederate General Jackson's Army commanded favorable purview of the entire battle area.

There was a stone wall of solid construction which skirted the base of Marye's Heights, and it was behind this wall that Kirkland and his fellow soldiers sought cover from the overwhelming numbers of arms which were wielded by the numerically superior Union Army.

Burnside, ambitious and reckless, ordered wave after wave of blue clad soldiers against this bulwark of defense. The Confederate marksmen behind the wall had little trouble

in repulsing these assaults with hundreds and thousands of Union casualties left behind to die or otherwise fend for themselves. On the afternoon of 13 December 1862, the open fields before Marye's Heights were littered with untold numbers of dead, dying and seriously wounded Union soldiers. The cries of their anguish were relentless.

Kirkland was a compassionate soul who could not long endure these sad cries for water and mercy. He sought permission from Col. Kershaw to cross the wall and provide water to these poor souls. Kershaw was reluctant, but acceded to the young man's request despite his firm opinion he would be shot the moment he raised his head above the wall.

Kirkland gathered as many canteens of water as he could carry and bounded over the wall. To all his comrade's amazement, the Union lines drawn up opposite the field did not open fire. Kirkland raced to the first soldier who lay freezing in the cold December weather and gave him water to drink and then threw his coat over him. He then raced to the next, and the next, and the next, giving life-saving water to these desperate victims of the cruelty of war. He perhaps gave aid and comfort to more than one hundred Union wounded that day and was revered by Union and Confederate alike for his great courage and compassion.

Following this great demonstration of humanity, Kirkland became known to both sides as the Angel of Marye's Heights. He was later killed at Chickamauga where the Union Army suffered another resounding defeat.

Later, when the Union Army of General Sherman approached the home of Richard Kirkland in South Carolina, even this ruthless General remembered the Angel of Marye's Heights and gave order that his home be spared from pillage and burning.

Angels come in all forms and personalities. Kirkland was angel to a great number of his enemies. Whose angel are you?

Jerry Ogles