

Courage, Honor, and Bravery of the Confederate Soldier

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"[There stood] before us . . . the embodiment of manhood, men whom neither toils and sufferings, nor the fact of death, nor hopelessness could bend from their resolve . . . " No greater compliment can be given to a soldier or army but from their former opponents. MG Joshua Chamberlain, an educator and soldier of sterling character and repute, said these words while facing General Gordon's Georgia troops at Appomattox.

"It required a naval fleet and 15,000 troops to advance against a weak fort, manned by less than 100 men, at Fort Henry; 35,000 with naval cooperation, to overcome 12,000 at Fort Donelson; 60,000 to secure victory over 40,000 at Shiloh; 120,000 to enforce the retreat of 65,000 after a month's fighting and maneuvering at Corinth; 100,000 were repelled by 60,000 in the first campaign against Richmond; 70,000 with a powerful naval force, to inspire the campaign which lasted nine months against 40,000 at Vicksburg; 90,000 to barely withstand the assault of 60,000 at Gettysburg. 115,000 sustaining a frightful repulse from 60,000 at Fredericksburg; 100,000 attacked and defeated by 50,000 at Chancellorsville; 85,000 held in check for two days by 40,000 at Antietam; 70,000 defeated at Chattanooga, and beleaguered by 40,000 at Chattanooga to Atlanta . . . ; and finally 120,000 to overcome 60,000 with exhaustion after a struggle of a year in Virginia." These are the words not of Confederate historians or veterans, but of Major General Don Carlos Buell, a Union Army commander.

Shortly after the war, another former foe, Union soldier Ambrose Bierce, responded to radical Republican politicians who had never fired a shot in anger, never marched a mile with a musket, never sweated under the load of a pack, and never faced a Confederate in battle when these politicians attempted to prevent the decoration of Confederate graves, a situation we find all too readily in the beginning of the 21st Century. He wrote the following words, addressing them to these "courageous" politicians:

"The brave respect the brave. The brave respect the dead; but you --- you draw that ancient blade, the ass's jaw, and shake it o'er a hero's grave."

Ladies and gentlemen, friends of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, fellow Compatriots of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, I am honored and humbled to speak to you as the representative of the Kansas Division, Sons of Confederate Veterans. I greet you on behalf of our commander, Jon Jenkins who so generously has allowed me to speak today for the SCV. Of all men who should really be here where I stand, is Commander Jenkins whose ancestor fought just a few yards from where we stand today.

The Confederate soldiers who were here were largely from Missouri and Arkansas. They were led by men who had proven their valor on other fields in other wars, such as Sterling Price, Mexican War hero and former Missouri governor. However, the large majority of soldiers were young, the average age of twenty. They weighed an average of 145 lbs. The average soldier stood 5'7", was a farmer of very modest means and had no slaves. That was the average. The Confederate soldiers were a varied lot and here in the Trans Mississippi, they were composed of thousands of Hispanic and Indian troops as well as blacks. According to eminent historian, Dr. Edward C. Smith of American University, anywhere from 63,000 to 90,000 blacks served with the Confederate armies. Dr. Smith, by the way, is black himself and an expert on black soldiers in American history.

Despite the fact that many of the soldiers here were ill-equipped, armed with obsolescent weapons, or not armed at all; despite the fact they were supplied only by what they could capture as Vicksburg's fall the year prior had cut the regular supply line to the east; despite the fact that they were in a "back water" theater of operations; despite the fact most of their homeland was occupied; despite the fact that in 1864 the situation was dire politically and militarily, despite all this, these men still believed that they had a right to fight for their rights and their form of government. The soldiers here fought out of conviction. They were hungry, tired, dispirited and were at the end of the longest cavalry raid of the war. The weather was cold and so were they. They had started in August but the winds of winter were already blowing and they had no winter clothing. They wore what they captured, not because they were attempting a ruse, but because they didn't have any other clothes.

As a former professional infantry soldier and instructor of graduate history at the Army's Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, I marvel at what these men endured and did. These were no mere mortals. When things were the worst, these Confederate soldiers stayed the course. Under the circumstances in which they found themselves, it would have been easy for all of them to quit and go home. Their opponents were well-supplied, equipped with modern weapons, and outnumbered them on every front. While the Confederates were not outnumbered at Mine Creek, it must be remembered that about half the army was south of the creek, essentially removing them from the battle, and those north of it were armed with inferior weapons. The fact the large majority of Confederate soldiers didn't quit, but fought to the end is a testament to their fidelity and perseverance under the most difficult of circumstances.

The Confederates who came to this place called Mine Creek did so in the hopes that in one last great gamble, to win a victory in the west and turn the tide of the war. At the end of the day, miles south of here, their army, shattered, moved in retreat towards Texas. With it went the hopes of the Confederacy in the Trans Mississippi west. The soldiers that fought here did so out of loyalty and obedience, hoping to redeem their homes and livelihoods. They lost their gamble but they sustained a reputation for bravery and courage. The Confederates on this field fought the best they could with outdated muzzle loading weapons against modern breech loaders, capable of firing seven rounds without reloading, thereby proving what our troops are finding in Iraq and Afghanistan right now, that the edge technology provides is sometimes the key to success.

As we commemorate the soldiers of both sides who fought here on that cold day in October 1864, it is important to remember that bravery and courage knows no uniform, no country, no creed. Soldiers, more than any others, understand what the cost of war is and the sacrifices that must be made. The men who fought here gave us a legacy that all Americans should be proud of. It is especially important to remember that Confederate soldiers are Americans too, not by our say, but by successive acts of the U.S. Congress that have granted soldiers' honors to them by allowing their graves to be marked with government issued headstones.

Union general William Haines Lytle said it best in an injunction to his troops at the end of the war: "To heal up the sores and scars, and cover up the bloody footprints that war will leave; to bury in oblivion all animosities against your former foe; and chivalrous as you are brave, standing on forever stricken fields, memorable in history, side by side with the Virginian, the Mississippian, or Alabamian, to carve on bronze or marble the glowing epitaph that tells us of Southern as well as Northern valor."

Thank you for your kind indulgence. God Bless the South and our great country!