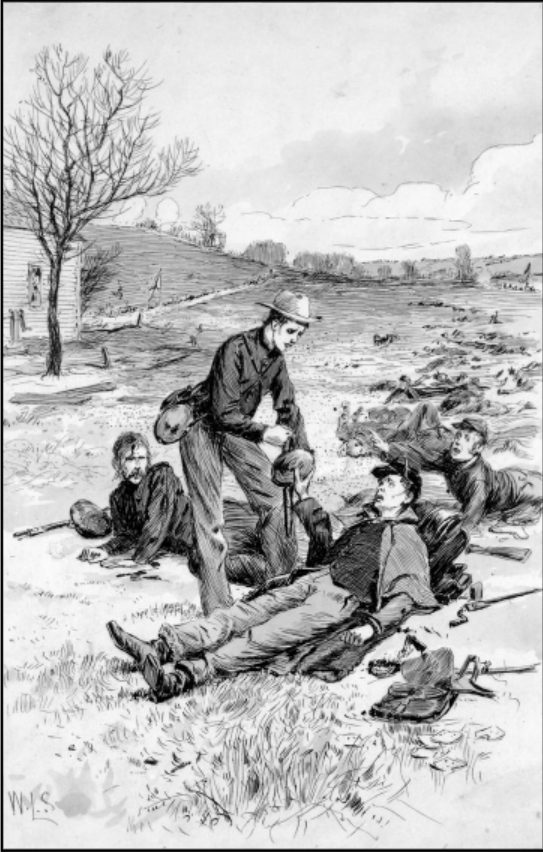


THE ANGEL OF MARYE'S HEIGHTS



1862 Battle of Fredericksburg ON CHRISTMAS DAY, 1862, with the memories of Fredericksburg still fresh in his mind, Gen. Robert E. Lee wrote his wife lamenting the hardships of war: "What a cruel thing is war: to separate and destroy families and friends, and mar the purest joys and happiness God has granted us in this world; to fill our hearts with hatred instead of love for our neighbors, and to devastate the fair face of this beautiful world."

And yet, amid the killing, there were individuals whose kindness and compassion lifted the spirit and reminded soldiers of their common humanity. Richard Rowland Kirkland was one such individual. On Dec. 14, 1862, Kirkland risked his life to comfort soldiers who lay wounded in front of Marye's Heights. It is not uncommon for a soldier to risk his life for a friend. What makes Kirkland's story so compelling is that he risked his life to help his enemies.

Kirkland was born in 1843 on his father's farm near Flat Rock, S.C. Like many boys in the rural South, Kirkland grew up learning to shoot rifles and ride horses. An even-tempered, religious lad, he attended Flat Rock Baptist Church and obtained a rudimentary education. Kirkland's mother died when he was just 2 years old, leaving his father to raise five sons and a daughter by himself. Richard was the youngest

boy, but he grew up fast. By 1861 he was 5 feet, 8 inches tall and weighed a lithe 150 pounds. A photograph taken of him at this time shows him as having a thin face, brown eyes, dark hair, and a neatly trimmed moustache.

As a young man growing up in the South, Kirkland followed the events leading to the Civil War with interest. On April 9, 1861, he enlisted in Company E of the 2nd South Carolina Volunteers. Three days later, South Carolina forces opened fire on a small United States garrison that had taken refuge inside Fort Sumter, in Charleston harbor, and forced it to surrender. In response, President Abraham Lincoln called upon states loyal to the Union to suppress the rebellion. The war was on.

Kirkland and his comrades initially joined other state troops gathering at Charleston, but when Virginia later joined the Southern Confederacy, the 2nd South Carolina was sent north to protect the Old Dominion from Northern invasion. The war was still in its infancy then, and anyone in uniform was seen as a patriot and a hero.

As Kirkland's regiment moved north, it received an enthusiastic welcome wherever it went. "We was received with [a] warm reception," the eager young soldier wrote his brother from Petersburg, "& glee every where through the state." Everywhere they stopped, citizens welcomed them with food, hugs and flowers. It was heady stuff for a man not yet 19 years of age.

All too soon, however, war's reality set in. In July, Kirkland got his first taste of combat at Bull Run, outside Manassas. Other battles followed: Savage's Station, Malvern Hill, Antietam. Suddenly war did not seem like such a glorious endeavor. Kirkland, however, did his duty and did not miss a battle. By December 1862, he was a seasoned veteran.

The 2nd South Carolina Regiment was in the thick of the fighting at Fredericksburg. When Union troops launched their attacks against Marye's Heights on Dec. 13, Gen. Robert E. Lee ordered Gen. Joseph B. Kershaw to reinforce Confederate troops fighting there. Kershaw led the 2nd South Carolina and the other units of his brigade across the plateau and into the Sunken Road below to join regiments from North Carolina and Georgia in repulsing the Union attacks.

The Confederates did their work well: By day's end 1,000 Union soldiers lay dead in front of the Heights. Seven thousand more had been wounded. Unable to move, most of the injured soldiers still lay between the lines when the sun rose the next day. No one could rescue them: to expose oneself on the plain even for an instant meant certain death. "The Yankees were literally piled in our front," remembered one South Carolinian, "dead and dying together, the living crying, water, water!"

The cries of one Union soldier were particularly piteous. After calling in vain for his friends to succor him, he cried out: "If my friends cannot give me water, will my enemies give me some?"

Richard Kirkland could not ignore such pleas. As a Christian, he may have remembered the Apostle Paul's injunction: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink." Bounding up the stairs of the nearby Stephens house, Kirkland asked Gen. Kershaw for permission to take water to his wounded enemies. Kershaw tried to talk him out of it. "Kirkland, don't you know that you would get a bullet through your head the moment you stepped over the wall?"

"Yes, sir," the young man replied, "I know that; but if you will let me, I am willing to try it." Kershaw could not refuse the noble request. Reluctantly, he gave Kirkland permission to go, trusting that God would protect him.

Kirkland hurried back down the stairs, but a moment later he returned. Kershaw assumed the well-intentioned sergeant had had second thoughts, but he was wrong: Kirkland simply wanted to perform his deed under a flag of truce. "General, can I show a white flag?" he inquired. Unfortunately, the general could not grant the request. The two sides were locked in combat; only the commanding general could negotiate a truce. Kirkland was undeterred. "All right," he replied, "I'll take the chances."

Borrowing canteens from several friends, Kirkland took a deep breath, jumped over the protective wall bordering the Sunken Road and dashed out onto the deadly plain. Bullets struck the mud around him, but he was not hit. Reaching the nearest soldier, Kirkland knelt down and, placing the man's head on his chest, poured the cooling liquid down the man's throat. He then took the soldier's knapsack and placed it under his head for a pillow, at the same time laying the man's overcoat across him for a blanket.

By now, the Union riflemen understood Kirkland's mission and had ceased firing at him. Some even cheered his bravery. For the next 90 minutes, Kirkland moved slowly about the field, giving aid to all he could reach. Who knows how many men benefited from his mercy?

As a result of his actions, Kirkland became known as "The Angel of Marye's Heights." He died just nine months later at the Battle of Chickamauga, but his deed at Fredericksburg was not forgotten. In 1965, local citizens led by Dr. Richard Nunn Lanier petitioned the state legislatures of Virginia and South Carolina to construct a monument to Kirkland's memory. Today it stands at the northeast corner of Mercer Street and Sunken Road, a rare testimony to man's humanity to man.

DONALD C. PFANZ is the staff historian at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park. He is author of "Abraham Lincoln at City Point" and "Richard S. Ewell: A Soldier's Life."