

BATTLEFIELD CORPSES TREATED WITH RESPECT

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Long ago, the law created criminal and civil rules governing treatment of corpses. Peacetime law, however, is often overlooked in war, where armies concern themselves with the living, friend and foe, and not the dead. Treaties and customs governing treatment of the dead apply but may be ignored.

Corpses may be buried individually or in groups on the battlefield or elsewhere, with reburial occurring days, months, or years later. Some may never be found. Civil War veterans often wrote about numbers, conditions, and smells of corpses.

Corpses were often treated properly, passed through enemy lines under flags of truce for return home. Perhaps this concern for the dead occurred because both sides shared history and customs, or because the war was at home and not abroad, or that opponents often knew or were related to each other, and many officers were West Point graduates or classmates.

George D. Boyd of Rockingham County, N.C., lost three sons in Confederate service.

Typhoid fever killed John in 1861. At Gettysburg, Samuel commanded the 45th North Carolina Troops and was captured on July 4; brother George was in Company A. From captivity, Samuel wrote his father, "You have no idea the pain it gives to announce that George my dear brother was killed" on July 1.

George died about 30 minutes after being wounded in the left hip. "He suffered greatly ... and prayed that he might die." Samuel, suffering a bad flesh wound before George was hit, "succeeded in getting him off the field and witnessed his burial at a secluded spot and marked his tomb."

Samuel Boyd also wrote to Frederick Hankey from the prison camp at Johnson's Island, Ohio, noting that he had asked Hankey if he could bury George near the Hankey home "so that his grave might not be disturbed and also would be

able to find it without too much trouble whenever ostilities ceased so as to carry his remains home."

Boyd described the marking of the grave ("Lt. George F. Boyd Co. 'A' 45th Reg't N.C.T. killed July 1st 1863. From Rockingham County No Ca.") and asked Hankey to add dirt if the grave sank. Boyd promised compensation to Hankey for grave maintenance. Samuel was exchanged and died leading the 45th at Spotsylvania.

All three sons were eventually buried in marked graves near home in Wentworth, N.C. Two Union casualties in the Wilderness present equally poignant stories, illustrating the anxiety of families not knowing the fate of relatives or personal effects.

On May 6, 1864, division commander Brig. Gen. James Wadsworth, a wealthy and influential politician, was shot in the back of the head in combat while mounted, fighting the 8th Alabama, his brains splattering over an aide's coat.

Assistant Secretary of War Charles Dana wrote on May 8, "Our latest report from General Wadsworth is that ... he lay senseless in a rebel hospital, shot through the brain, and sure to die." Confederate reports noted that Wadsworth had fallen into their hands.

Wadsworth's fate was gruesome, left propped against a tree where his personal effects — sword, watch, field glasses, boots, hat, and coat buttons — were taken as souvenirs. One soldier gave Wadsworth's map to Lt. Col. Moxley Sorrel, James Longstreet's chief of staff.

Z.B. Adams, a Union physician who led a company at the Wilderness, was shot in the leg, captured, and found himself in a ghastly circumstance: on the ground under an operating table with blood dripping on him. After Confederate surgeons operated on him, he found himself on the ground by Wadsworth, who was alive but unresponsive.

Adams observed Wadsworth's surgery, noting that some of it was substandard, and cut a lock of Wadsworth's hair — fearing it might be the only relic left of the general — and later gave it to Mrs. Wadsworth.

Wadsworth died on May 8.

On May 15, Maj. Gen. George Meade wrote to an unnamed Confederate commander, "I would esteem it a personal favor for which I shall be grateful if you will permit the bearer [an assistant surgeon] to pass within your lines sufficiently far to obtain the remains of the late Brig. Gen. J.S. Wadsworth, for the purpose of transferring them to his afflicted widow and relatives."

On May 17, Meade wrote Lee, "I have the honor to acknowledge receipt ... of your letter ... stating that you have directed that the remains of the late Brigadier-General Wadsworth be sent to the lines of this army, and beg that you will accept my sincere thanks for your kind consideration of the request contained in my communication of the 15th instant."

Meade wrote to Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant on July 1 concerning a letter from Wadsworth's widow, "inclosing one for General R.E. Lee, asking the return of certain articles found on the general's person." Meade demurred to Grant, senior commander present, who answered that the time was not right, but "the first time a [truce] flag is being sent for any other purpose it can go through."

Lee replied on July 10 to Grant's letter concerning Wadsworth. "I have directed inquiries to be made for the effects of the late General Wadsworth, and if they can be found [I] will take great pleasure in restoring them to his widow."

Sorrel returned the map years later to Wadsworth's son, then a congressman. On July 7, Grant had written Lee inquiring about the fate of Col. William Sackett, commander of the 9th New York Cavalry, whose men supposedly fired the first shots at Gettysburg. On June 11, 1864, Sackett was wounded and captured at Trevilian Station.

His wife was with Grant "in deep distress and feeling great anxiety to learn the fate of her husband," wanting to visit him. Grant noted that he had the pleasure "to relieve the minds of persons in the South having friends in the North" either by forwarding letters or determining where they were.

Lee wrote Grant on July 10 that he had taken measures to find Sackett but could not agree to the proposed route chosen by Mrs. Sackett to visit her husband. As it turned out, Sackett had died on June 14.

One notes the incongruity of opposing general officers taking time to communicate compassionately about fallen warriors and corpses.

Not all families were as fortunate as the Boyds, Wadsworths, or Sacketts. Many soldiers or sailors simply vanished.

For those with graves, the fortunate ones have individual headstones with names. Others bear the haunting, ambiguous "Unknown." Some are in mass graves lacking markers; some with markers lacking names; others with markers including names, indicating those who died and were buried there or returned home for burial.

One example is a marker near Point Lookout, the Union prison camp in Maryland, with names of Confederates who died there, including one of the author's ancestors:
"WESCOTT, JOHN W. C 30 N.C. SGT."

The organized butchery did not operate constantly. Chivalry and humanity occasionally stopped the killing machinery so bodies could be located and treated respectfully, with burial in place or return to a family for the burial of someone who left home alive but returned in a coffin.

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