

April to April: Masons and Knights at the Beginning and End of the Civil War

by **Sir Knight Richard F. Muth**

As we commemorate the Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War, which effectively spanned from April of 1861 to April of 1865, it is appropriate to remember some of our Brethren who participated in that so-called "Brother's War."

Late one night in April of 1861, two fraternal brothers, separated by the waters of Charleston Harbor, waited anxiously. Major Robert Anderson, who would be knighted in Columbian Commandery No. 1, New York City the following year, had evacuated his command to an unfinished brick and stone structure named Fort Sumter only a few days after South Carolina seceded from the Union. This small garrison, strategically located in the heart of secessionist territory, was now a focal point for the growing tension between the governments of the United States and the fledgling Confederate States. In January, President James Buchanan, a Past District Deputy Grand Master in the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, had tried to resupply the fortress to the indignation of the Southerners. If President Abraham Lincoln were to do the same, the Confederates promised it would mean war. Word had come that he was going to do just that, but before this could take place, orders were received by the Confederate commander, newly minted Brigadier General and Sir Knight Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard.

In January, while Superintendent of the United States Military Academy at West Point, Beauregard had resigned from the Federal Army to enter the service of the Confederacy. As a student at the academy, he had been a pupil of Anderson's and later became his assistant in artillery instruction. The two had become close friends. Still, Beauregard could not allow the Federals to dominate the control of such an important harbor, and Anderson could not desert his post while they still had a few days rations left. After the final ultimatum was refused, Confederate officers notified Anderson that they would open fire before morning. At 4:30 a.m. on April 12th, 1861, the shore batteries commenced firing, the Union guns replied, and the American Civil War had begun.

Despite more than three thousand cannonballs fired at the fort and the many rounds returned by its defenders, not a single person on either side was killed during the thirty-four hour cannonade. Yet it eventually became clear to Anderson that their position was untenable, and he agreed to surrender the fort. Ironically, the war's first casualties came when an accidental explosion during a planned one hundred gun salute, fired by the Federals in honor of their flag, mortally wounded two Union privates and seriously injured the remaining four members of the gun crew. The next four years, however, would be far more bloody.

Beauregard was soon lauded in the South as the "Hero of Sumter" and would continue to distinguish himself throughout the war as well as in the years that followed. Despite his

surrender, Anderson too was lauded as a hero by those in the North. The flag he brought back from Fort Sumter became a national icon, inspiring the patriotic display of flags throughout the country. On April 14th of 1865, Brevet Major General Anderson returned once again and raised the Stars and Stripes over Fort Sumter, just hours before Abraham Lincoln was shot.

In April of 1865, the long drum roll of War played out. Although some sporadic fighting continued for a few months, General Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox Courthouse on April 9th effectively ended the conflict. Yet again however, April 12th would be a momentous date for another pair of opposing commanders and Masonic brothers, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain of United Lodge No. 8 in Brunswick, Maine and John Brown Gordon of Atlanta Lodge No. 59 in Georgia.

General Grant had stipulated that the Confederate troops must formally surrender their arms and battle flags in the presence of a representative portion of the Union army. The date set was April 12th, coincidentally but not insignificantly, exactly four years after the opening shots were fired at Fort Sumter. The officer selected to lead this ceremony was Brevet Major General Chamberlain. Brother Chamberlain was not a military man. Having graduated from Seminary, he had been the professor of rhetoric, oratory, and modern languages at Bowdoin College in Maine, but he was well respected as a soldier by his superior officers. In fact, the only battlefield promotion ever given by General Grant was that which raised Chamberlain to Brigadier. He earned the Congressional Medal of Honor for saving the left flank of the Union line at Gettysburg and earned a brevet promotion to Major General for "conspicuous gallantry and meritorious service" as he turned the left flank of the Confederate forces and repeatedly routed them during the two weeks preceding the surrender. During the war he had been wounded at least five times, one of which was pronounced mortal, but he survived it for an additional fifty years. Chamberlain well knew the significance of the event he was honored to command. Grant had wished the ceremony to be simple but meaningful with no intent to humiliate the foe, and these were Chamberlain's thoughts as well. He felt that the defeated foe deserved recognition for their courage and valor and that they needed to be brought back into the fold as part of a reunited nation.

Major General John B. Gordon, who had commanded the troops opposing Chamberlain's during the last days of fighting and led the final charge of the Army of Northern Virginia, had been a member of the delegation appointed to work out the details of the surrender terms. He and the other Southern Generals pleaded that their men be allowed to stack their arms in their camps and quietly depart, away from the eyes of their foe. This was not to be, and he was despondent at the thought of leading four Confederate corps in parade to lay down their arms before the victors. He too, had not been a military man but rather a lawyer before the war. Yet he also distinguished himself and quickly rose in rank and responsibility. He too, had been wounded - five times in one day at Sharpsburg (or Antietam to the Federals) when he very nearly died. After the war he would be elected to the United States Senate three times, and like Chamberlain, he would serve his State as Governor, be a proponent of reconciliation, and become a much sought after public speaker.



Early on the morning of April 12th, Chamberlain took position at the right of his command, which was inline beside the main road at Appomattox. Above him flew the Stars and Stripes and the banner of the First division of the Fifth Corps which, similar to many of our own Templar banners, was a bright red Maltese cross on a field of white. In the distance, the long gray line could be seen approaching with battle flags unfurled. Chamberlain described the event in these words:

"The momentous meaning of this occasion impressed me deeply. I resolved to mark it by some token of recognition, which could be no other than a salute of arms. Well aware of the responsibility assumed and of the criticisms that would follow... [The] salute was not to the cause for which the flag of the Confederacy stood but to its going down before the flag of the Union. My main reason, however, was one for which I sought no authority nor asked forgiveness. Before us in proud humiliation stood the embodiment of manhood: men whom neither toils and sufferings, nor the fact of death, nor disaster, nor hopelessness could bend from their resolve; standing before us now; thin, worn, and famished; but erect and with eyes looking level into ours, waking memories that bound us together as no other bond;-was not such manhood to be welcomed back into a Union so tested and assured?"

Instructions had been given, and when the head of each division column comes opposite our group, our bugle sounds the signal, and instantly our whole line from right to left, regiment by regiment in succession, gives the soldier's salutation, from the "order arms" to the old "carry"-the marching salute. Gordon at the head of the column, riding with heavy spirit and downcast face, catches the sound of shifting arms, looks up, and taking the meaning, wheels superbly, making with himself and his horse one uplifted figure, with profound salutation as he drops the point of his sword to the boot toe; then facing to his own command, gives word for his successive brigades to pass us with the same position of the manual,-honor answering honor. On our part not a sound of trumpet more, nor roll of drum; not a cheer, nor word nor whisper

of vain-glorying, nor motion of man standing again at the order, but an awed stillness rather, and breath-holding, as if it were.

Neither Gordon nor Chamberlain were Templars, yet they were knights in spirit and action. Indeed, Brother Gordon repeatedly referred to Brother Chamberlain as "one of the knightliest soldiers of the Federal army." Of that day at Appomattox, Gordon would say that "No scene like it in any age was ever witnessed at the end of a long and bloody war." Additionally, a Virginia veteran who was also present that day would remark sixty years later that "reunion began with that order to present arms." By this simple yet profound act, Chamberlain had, unknowingly, enacted the admonition given to all newly knighted Templars, that "having subdued your enemy, regard him no longer as your foe, but extend to him that glorious attribute of Deity, Mercy." In doing so, he began to bind up the wounds of a nation afflicted by four long years of bitter war.

May we all learn from the actions of these brothers and behave as knightly.

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Update: August 19, 2014 [Top](#)

