

“Rally Round the Flags”

“The New York State Civil War Battle Flag Collection.”

Ezra Simon recorded in the Regimental History of the 125th Regiment, New York Volunteer Infantry, that *Sgt. Lewis Smith, color-bearer of the 125th, was “instantly killed” just passed the swale. But, “ere the colors could touch the ground, Harrison Clark of E Company bent down and grasped them; bring them out of the battle”*. “For his gallantry, Private Clark on the next day was called to the front of the regiment, and promoted to the rank of color-sergeant. For his heroic deed at Gettysburg on the evening of July 2nd, Harrison Clark would receive the Congressional Medal of Honor. Overall, more union soldiers were awarded the Medal of Honor for action regarding flags than any other reason. It’s not hard to understand why, for to carry the flags of one’s regiment in battle was one of the most honored positions and duties that could be bestowed upon a soldier by his commanders and comrades. Even though all Civil War infantrymen knew the risks associated with carrying the colors, there was never a shortage of brave men who wanted to carry these glorious banners. For being a color bearer required exceptional bravery and was considered a mark of great distinction. His duty was to carry the colors at the direction of the commanding officer of the regiment while under fire and unarmed. Most notably, color bearers had to face the enemy and never break and run in retreat, or the entire regiment might follow.

As mentioned before, the most trusted and honorable position soldiers could be given was to be in their regiment’s color guard. It was a duty that these brave soldiers took seriously because not only did they realize that their unit was depending on them to care for and protect their most sacred items, but these soldiers also realized that once they accepted the position as a color bearer that they were most likely volunteering to sacrifice their own life when the battle erupted.

The fate of the color-bearer and the color guard in the Civil War is well documented. The mortality rate of color-bearers was very high, as the placement of the regimental colors was so conspicuous on the battlefield; they were often used as a target for rifle and artillery fire. To illustrate the importance of the Union battle flag to the men who fought under it... At the Battle of Antietam, the 69th Regiment of New York Volunteer Infantry of the famous Irish Brigade made a charge against Confederate General John Brown Gordon’s position in the Sunken Road (or Bloody Lane). According to tradition, at least eight different men were either wounded or killed carrying their regiment's flags on that day.

The role of the color-guard and the regimental flags were critical in Civil War battles. In 19th century warfare flags were a crucial component in a unit's combat effectiveness. Because of the strategic importance of the regimental flags in aligning and rallying in battle, the colors and guidons became the focal point as they marked the position of the regiment on the battle field. The rank and file of the regiment was trained to follow the flags, for the field of battle could be a very confusing place in the smoke and noise of battle. Regiments could become scattered and vocal commands or even bugle call could not be heard, so a visual rallying point was essential.

The flags were important to these soldiers, not only for their tactical implication, for these flags also gave the individual units their spirit and identity. The colors held a special significance in the morale of the combat unit, a spiritual value that embodied the very soul of the regiment. Civil War soldiers placed great importance on the national and regimental colors of their regiment. On the field of battle, the men would sacrifice their lives defending them and keeping them from capture by the enemy. Soldiers took pride in their regiment's flags, and the areas within the states that they represented, and the morale of that regiment was focused on that pride.

"Battle Honors" or "Battle Markings" were painted or written on a regiment's flags, as a proud reminder of their participation in specific battles during the war. Union soldiers typically wrote the names of engagements on the red and white portions of their National Colors, some were artistically painted in gold, black or red. Though most units preferred to mark their national flags, some unit's also placed marking on their state regimental flag. The more battle honors depicted on a units flags showed others of a regiment's combat service and veteran's status. As the war continued and battle honors were added, it became a point of pride to say that they were veterans of these engagements. Battle honors gave the flags increased significance making them a record of valorous service, while other flag's battle honors were simply the tears and holes gained only from flying in the midst of desperate action.

These simple cloths on a pole were the one true item in each fighting unit that gave the unit its honor, devotion, identity, direction, and determination in battle. The men who fought under these grand symbols looked upon them with loving admiration and great reverence for they understood above all the blood that was shed fighting under the flags of their state and union.

Even before the end of the war, the State of New York recognized the importance of these patriotic symbols of sacrifice and devotion and would put considerable effort into collecting the Battle Flags of its many regiments. With the creation of the Bureau of Military Statistics, the State of New York would act in accordance with a circular dated January 21, 1863, wherein Adjutant General John Sprague expresses: ***“That all regimental colors, worn out in service, and of consolidated regiments, be forwarded to General Headquarters so that they may be deposited in an appropriate manner as a record of the war and fortitude of her sons.”***

Complying with this directive issued by Adjutant General Sprague, many regiments forwarded their battle flags and on April 24, 1863 several flags were presented and honored before a joint session of the New York Legislature with Governor Seymour in attendance. This “1863 Presentation” included - one flag each from the 30th, 40th, 60th, 61st, 71st, 101st, and 102nd Regiments, NY Volunteer Infantry. These seven flags formed the core of the battle flag collection as we know it today. In the “1864 Presentation” fifty flags were chosen by Governor Seymour from those collected during 1863 and the early months of 1864, and were formally presented on April 20, 1864 before the Legislature in joint session.

On July 3, 1865, in conjunction with Albany’s Independence Day public celebration, the final and most grand Flag Presentation Ceremony was held. Arranged by the Bureau of Military Statistics, the invited guests included General Ulyesses S. Grant his staff, as well as Generals Kilpatrick, Butterfield, and Sickles. Major General Daniel Butterfield provided the “1865 Presentation” address in which he declared, ***“These standards are returned, battle-scarred, hallowed by the blood of your patriot sons - a precious treasure, a priceless legacy, for they shall tell your children's children of manhood and patriotism rising in their might to sustain the right. These are glorious insignia of the highest devotion and sacrifice of man for man, of man for country. I may ask you . . . that you cherish them . . . as proud mementoes of the triumph of right.”***

Over the next two years, the Bureau of Military Statistics would see the collection grow. In its Fourth Annual Report submitted to the Legislature on February 11, 1867, would indentify 811 flags within the collection. In 1881 to honor and display the flag in this vast collection, each was furled on its staff and placed in a glass case for storage and viewing at the State Capital. The flag collection would continue to grow, today there are over 2,000 military flags dating from the War of 1812 to present.

Nearly a century and a half of poor storage has subjected these flags to the harmful effects of humidity, light, gravity and temperature variance and today these glorious banners are in fair to poor condition. These flags will continue to deteriorate until they receive proper care and improved storage conditions

Today, the New York State Military Museum administered by the New York State Department of Military & Naval Affairs is responsible for the interpretation, display, and care of the New York Battle Flag Collection. In 2000, the Military Museum in conjunction with the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation began work on the New York State Battle Flag Preservation Project. The projects goals are to implement a preservation program and create a flag archive for the conservation, storage and study of the Battle Flag Collection. Between 2000 and 2010 the States Parks textile conservators, with the assistance of a curator from the New York State Military Museum have, conserved over five hundred flags. Despite these efforts, nearly 75-percent of the collection (including about half of the Civil War flags) still awaits preservation and proper storage. With funding from the Governor's Office and Legislature, has in that period of time invested over one million dollars in the Flag Preservation Project. Support, through public donations and the Flag Sponsorship Program have assisted toward the success of the Flag Project.

Over that last several years, funding for the Flag Collection Project has all but dried up due to state's budget constraints. Now more than ever support is needed to continue and see this project through to its just conclusion. These sacred banners are now facing their most challenging battle *that of time*. Each year the flags that are still being displayed at the Capital suffer deterioration. Without state funding, the future of these patriotic symbols of sacrifice and devotion are in jeopardy. Now like our patriotic forefathers who rallied around the flag in defense of our state and nation so many years ago, we the Sons of Union Veterans must ***"Rally Round the Flags"*** and come to the defense of these precious treasures.

The Sons of Union Veterans was established to perpetuate the memory of the Grand Army of the Republic and the men who saved the Union. The mission of this organization, as described in the words of Major Augustus P. Davis in December of 1881 was: ***"That through this organization the declining days of the Union Veteran will be made pleasant, his record of service to his country preserved, his memory honored, patriotism promoted"***. These are the words inscribed on the home page of the Son's of Union Veterans of the Civil War National Headquarters web site. They, along with Article II of the Constitution and Regulations of the Son's of Union Veterans Of The Civil War should give all of us

members more than enough patriotic passion to “**Rally Round the Flags**” They truly are the record of their service to this country. What better way could we find to honor their memory than to work toward the preservation of these glorious banners?

On April 1, 2014, the State of New York passed its annual budget package of 143 billion dollars. Again, not one dollar was designated toward the reinstatement of the Flag Preservation Project. In fact, both houses of the State Legislature have failed to allocate money for five years straight for the preservation and storage of the flag collection. An exciting new chapter in the New York State Battle Flag collection’s history has come to a distressing halt.

My feelings are that this noble cause does not have a champion. Brothers, we need to take our obligation to our ancestors seriously for as the legal successors of the Grand Army of the Republic it is our duty to continue the fight to preserve their record of service to this country. We must campaign the halls of the State Capital and the Legislative Office Building in Albany seeking the funding needed to continue and bring this project to fruition.

The New York Department of the Son’s of Union Veterans of the Civil War must become involved and take a leadership role in the preservation of these flags by forming a committee, and formulating a resolution concerning the New York State Flag Preservation Project. The New York Department has the power to bring all the state’s camps and members together; to appeal through writing their Assemblymen and Senators and petitioning them to allocate the funds necessary to reinstate the Flag Project. We must go to Albany and lobby members of the legislature under the banner of the Son’s of Union Veterans.

As your Patriotic Instructor, my duty and purpose is to provide information to educate you, my Brothers and the general public in order to help foster patriotism: I hope this endeavor to “**Rally Round the Flags**” can inspire all of us to become involved and honor the flags under which our ancestor’s so bravely fought and died.

In Fraternity, Charity & Loyalty

Brother Richard E. Straight, Patriotic Instructor

Col. George L. Willard Camp # 154 / Son’s of Union Veterans of the Civil War