ANTIETAM

by Stephan A. Schwartz

In the darkened silence the endless line of cars moves slowly forward, and no one honks. No one breaks the line. Spread out in the night across the Maryland fields are thousands upon thousands of little points of light -- small brown bags, each with a flickering candle. One for every dead or wounded soldier both North and South. On the first Saturday in December since 1988, volunteers have risen early to take part in this one night citizen ceremony. Elderly widows, generals, and entry level clerks have made sure the bags are lighted and in place by dusk. Now the tiny lights float in the dark, a twinkling pattern undulating across the gentle hills; a haunting image, profoundly moving.

Most Americans think of D-Day as our nation's benchmark for carnage. Images from *Saving Private Ryan* newly fixed it in our collective mind. Yet the most massive amphibious assault in history, the product of months of planning by the greatest ground armies ever assembled, does not begin to rise to a moment-of-opportunity battle fought in a few small farm fields with single-shot muzzle-loaded long guns, and mostly smooth-bore horse drawn cannon.

It is called The Battle of Antietam because the North won, and the Union named battles after geographical features – Antietam Creek is a beautiful stream with wooded banks, winding through the countryside of rural Maryland. In the South it was known as The Battle of Sharpsburg; the Confederacy named battles after nearby towns. By either name, when it was over, 12 hours after it had begun at 5:30 on the morning of September 17th, 1862, it was the greatest single day of blood sacrifice in American history.

Nine times as many Americans were killed or wounded at Antietam as on June 6, 1944 -- the so-called "longest day" of World War II. More soldiers, in fact, were killed and wounded at Antietam than during the

American Revolution, the War of 1812, The Mexican War (1846-1848), and Spanish-American War (1897-1898) combined.

The blood shed that day gave Abraham Lincoln the political security to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, the most important statement on American governance since the Bill of Rights amended the Constitution in 1789. Like a missing piece in a puzzle it added completeness to America's Declaration of Independence, and became the defining moment of the Civil War. The dead and maimed white soldiers who fought Antietam made the down payment that bought freedom for black Americans.

Lincoln wrote the single page of the Proclamation entirely by himself and, although it only freed those slaves living in the states in rebellion, it laid the groundwork for the 13th Amendment by reducing the conflict to its moral essence – slavery. The reward for that act of public virtue was the continued integrity of the United States as a nation. Europe -- where slavery was outlawed -- could no longer support a Confederacy which made slavery a legal fundamental. America would no longer be pressured by outside forces to split, and the Monroe Doctrine, protecting the New World from Old World incursions, would not die.

I am drawn back to the battlefield the next day and in the warm afternoon light of fall it is an intimate landscape, almost unchanged from the day of the battle. Hard to imagine 160,000 men massing here for a fight.; like a murderous riot in a stadium parking lot. Harder still, as two squirrels chase each other across a tree, to imagine the groans of pain, the acrid smell of black powder, and the broken men, body parts, overturned gun carriages, and dead horses that were the battle's physical aftermath. Death lay a carpet over the living fields so thick one survivor said it was hard to walk without stepping on bodies. When it was over 12,401 Union, and 10,318 Confederates – 22,719 soldiers in all -- would be either dead, wounded, or missing, and an equivalent number of families would never be the same.

This was the farmland of a small spiritual community, the Brethren, their church was its tactical objective. Now, as then, it is a little white brick church, with green shutters, a shake shingle roof and a chimney in the center. There are two stone steps up into a single low room, two windows on each wall, two doors and, in the middle, an endearing small black pot-bellied stove. Simple benches of pine face a pine table, behind

which are two smaller benches. Nothing is on the walls, there is no religious iconography, not even a cross. These were people whose spiritual life took place internally. They didn't need outward signs, didn't want outward signs; their services were meditations. Sitting in the cool dim quiet of this simple room of faith, the clean dignity of these people pervades the senses.

It provides the moment necessary to appreciate the battle's mythic quality: a fight over freedom, fought on land belonging to a sect whose only dogma is the universal brotherhood of man; its goal their church.

"The white-washed Dunkerd Church stood out like a lighted window against the dark green of the West Woods," one veteran said. It was all on a Wednesday, the first time war touched Northern soil.

The carnage was caused mostly by the field artillery: horse drawn parrott rifles, napoleons, and 10-pounders. Some less than 500 yards from their intended targets. Like giant shotguns they spewed out hundreds of marble sized balls of metal. Or if not this, then single projectiles as big as fire place logs, scything down men, corn stalks, and horses. The sound was deafening. It left men stunned. Surgeon Captain J. R. Boulware, said, "I was never so tired of shelling in my life before. I hate cannons."

Walking the verge of the narrow farm roads that are the battle's borders, granite, marble and cast iron monuments incongruously line the edges of the fields like wayward tombstones, each marking a company or brigade, enumerating their dead and wounded. From the dates incised in stone or cast into plaques it is easy to see that these sentinels for the past were erected years after the war, when the veterans were aging. These lists, in stone and metal, evoke the hollow sounds of small meetings in large halls, windows open to the summer nights; the murmur of gatherings in churches and living rooms as the subscriptions to assure remembrance were taken up. There is no doubt: this land is a sacred space.

Many of the soldiers that September morning were teen-agers from farms and frontiers but, for all their youth, they were already hardened veterans. The military long gun they fired was not much different in its essentials from the weapon they used at home for food and vermin, most having begun their practice with it when the gun was taller than they

were. They knew instinctively about hiding behind rocks, being widely separated, retreating when appropriate. But that isn't how the Civil War worked.

Officers on both sides, particularly in the first years, before casualties reduced their number, were mostly products of the Mexican War; West Pointers trained in Napoleonic tactics built around the limitations of the musket. Muskets were smooth bore weapons, the long tube of the barrel had no grooves to give a bullet the spin needed to shoot accurately. Their effective killing range was only about 80 yards. The French solution to these inadequacies was to bunch men close together, to get them all to aim at a small target area and fire as a group. In essence to create a collective shotgun to aim at the enemy. If no single bullet could be assured of reaching its mark, a hail of them, was sure to hit something. Armies all over the world adopted this approach to battle, interspersing the blocs of muskets with field cannon.

The noise and smoke this combat produced made voice commands impossible to hear over any distance, and hand signals useless, so the only way to make the tactic work was to have men move at an exact pre-ordained, and robotic pace, staying so close together they were literally touching as they faced the enemy's fire. Learning to move as a bloc, and not to run -- as any sensible man would -- was most of what a young soldier learned.

These stylized group movements made the musket an effective weapon but, when armies converted to rifles, the tactic was horribly wrong and meant mass death. The rifle's long barrel had parallel grooves spiraling down its length giving bullets a stabilizing spin making them lethal to 300 yards, as well as capable of being effectively aimed. By the time of Antietam, rifles had largely replaced the musket, particularly in the Union army, yet the massed movement of troops had not altered. Standing on the brow of a low hill at one end of a field where those young men in blue and butternut had stood facing one another, it is impossible to doubt that the men all knew what to expect that morning.

They were exhausted and battle weary. Many of the Confederates had literally walked through their boots and were barefoot or with rags round their feet. These same armies had fought two pitched battles -- Second Manasas, and South Mountain -- and many skirmishes, within the previous 18 days. Standing or kneeling in the Brethren's fields they

knew that many of them were going to die; knew their officers' tactics would kill them, yet they fought anyway. Why? Politicians and commentators had complex arguments involving states rights, and legal claims. For these soldiers it was simpler, and more authentic. In later interviews, and in their diaries and journals, they give two main reasons: they did not want to let down their friends, the men standing to the left and right with whom they had lived and fought and marched; and because, at its deepest level, this was a family fight, brewing for years, that had to be settled.

My 93-year old mother, who grew up in Kentucky, tells a story of my own family. When war was declared the family was at dinner. Two great uncles she would never know stood up, shook hands over the table, and left the room; one to serve in the Confederacy, the other with the Union. Both were killed at Antietam.

The American Civil War was unique. This was a disagreement within one racial family so profound that only a war could settle it. At no other time in history has one race fought a war amongst itself over the status of another race. No one external to America pushed us into this blood feud. The unresolved dispute of the Constitutional Convention, and the Constitution's tortured legalism in which a slave was counted as 3/5s of a white man came down to this battle. These people gathered here, country boys, city workers, many away from home for the first time, speaking the same language, sharing the same roots, prepared to die over the status of black people most did not know, members of a race a surprising number had never even seen.

It is hard to get a reliable number on how many slaves came into first the colonies and, then, the states until the importation of slaves was made illegal in 1803. But most historians seem to accept that it was something on the order of 2.4 million. The butcher's bill for the War from 1862 to 1865 was 635,000 killed or missing in action. All men who had come from families. The average family was at least four people: 635,000 times four -- two million five hundred and forty thousand men women and children. Many had fathered families of their own, so the number of whites affected is actually larger. There is a horrible and unacknowledged symmetry of sacrifice here.

George Mason, the Father of the Bill of Rights had told his colleagues at the Constitutional Convention of 1787, that slavery was a moral error

that would bring "the judgment of heaven on the United States. As nations cannot be rewarded or punished in the next world they must be in this. By an inevitable chain of causes and effects providence punishes national sins by national calamities." Antietam proved the truth of his prediction.

A small bird lands near me, as I am standing where an Ohio regiment stood that morning. There were birds that day as well. The hills and fields look now as they looked then. The scattered farm buildings I can see are the same ones those young boys saw. Sergeant Thomas F. Galwey, 8th Ohio Infantry said there was no shelter to be found in the field in front of him, which was speckled with white clover. It was a mystery to him how so many men could fit into so small a space, and he was deafened by the endless bang of explosions great and small. As he was kneeling in the grass he noticed that every blade was moving and he supposed it was the result of crickets disturbed by the battle. When he said this to the man next to him, all he got in return was a laugh. Then he saw that it was not crickets, but the hail of bullets coming towards them as the Confederates advanced that caused the grass to tremble. Just then General Kimball passed near him, and he heard his commander say, "God save my poor boys".

At the end of the century many may still see only failure in how we deal with race, but history, I think, will see us mostly moving forward to make real America's most fundamental precept of equal rights. What astonishes is not that it takes sacrifices like Antietam to move the course of history, but that ordinary Americans mistrusted by politicians, and disdained by theorists, have always been prepared to stand and make them.