The Tragedy of Friends at War: Hancock, Armistead and Garnett at Pickett’s Charge

“Armistead at Gettysburg” by Keith Rocco

The bonds of friendship forged by soldiers are some of deepest and long lasting that are formed anywhere. For American military professionals those bonds are formed in the small rather closed society that is the regular United States military. They are formed in war and peace, and are marked by years of deployments, isolated duty and combat. They are part of a culture that is often quite different than that of civilian society. That is the case now as it was in 1860.

When the Southern States seceded from the Union men who had spent much of their adult lives serving together discovered had to say goodbye and prepare to fight each other. Most did so with a heavy heart even though many had strong convictions about the rightness of their region’s cause. Those who left the army to serve the Confederate states were often torn by doubt and questions of where their loyalty lay. Robert E. Lee was a good example of the conflict that many Southern officers faced. “The Southern professional officer in 1861 was confronted with a cruel choice symbolized by Lee’s anguished pacing at Arlington. On one hand, the Southern officer’s political allegiances drew him to the Confederacy; on the other his professional responsibility drew him to the Union.” [1] They wrestled with their oath of office and the costs of perhaps having to face their dearest friends on future battlefields. Lee’s letter to his sister Ann Marshall, who remained a supporter of the Union, after he resigned from the army he had served for 32 years reflects that anguish, torn between his loyalties Lee wrote “With all my devotion to the Union, and the dear feeling of loyalty and duty of an American citizen, I have not been able to make up my mind to raise my hand against my relatives, my children, my home.” [2] He added: “I know you will blame me…but you must think as kindly of me as you can, and believe that I have endeavored to do what I think right.” [3]

They were different from the mass levies of civilian volunteers who rallied to the flags of the Union and Confederacy in 1861. The volunteers, most of whom did not have the deep and abiding friendships of the professionals were often motivated by ideological, sectional or religious hatred of the other and went to war with great aplomb. However, the professionals for the most part went to war against former comrades with heavy heart, “old army colleagues found themselves wrenched from the normal course of their lives when their states joined the Confederacy.” [4]

The American Civil War has many such tales. Porter Alexander wrote of his final words with his superior James B. McPherson, who later went on to be a highly successful corps commander under Grant and Sherman before being killed outside Atlanta in 1864. McPherson desired that Alexander remain in California as an Engineering officer and warned him about the nature of the coming war and gave him his counsel as a friend:

“How this is not going to be any 90 day or six months affair as some of the politicians are predicting. Both sides are in deadly earnest & it is long & desperate & fought to the bitter end. God only knows what may happen to you individually, but for your cause there can be but one possible result. It must be lost....” [5]
Alexander wrote: “Nothing could exceed the kindness & real affection with which McPherson urged these views on me.... His earnest talk impressed me deeply & made me realize that a crisis in my life was at hand. But I felt helpless to avert it or even to debate the question what I should do. I could not controvert one of McPherson’s statements or arguments; I could only answer this: “Mac, My people are going to war, & and for their liberty. If I don’t come & bear my part they will believe me a coward…”  

One of the most remembered is that of Union General Winfield Scott Hancock and Confederate General Lewis Armistead. It was key story line in Michael Shaara’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Killer Angels* was immortalized in the movie *Gettysburg* which is based on Shaara’s novel.

**Major General Winfield Scott Hancock USA**

Hancock was from Pennsylvania. He was a career soldier and Infantry officer, a graduate of West Point Class of 1844. He served in Mexico and held numerous positions. In 1861 he was stationed in California as a Quartermaster under the command of Colonel (Brevet Brigadier General) Albert Sidney Johnston with the Sixth Infantry Regiment. One of his fellow officers was Captain Lewis Armistead, a twice widowed Virginian who also served as a commander of the New San Diego Garrison under Johnston’s command, and Richard Garnett commanding a company at Fort Yuma. Hancock and his wife Almira became fast friends with the widowed Virginian.

Armistead was a nephew of the officer who defended Fort McHenry from the British in the War of 1812. Armistead had academic and personal difficulties at West Point and “was bounced out, not once but twice.” [7] His troubles included an altercation with Jubal Early in which he broke a plate over Early’s head. Between his academic difficulties and the fight with Early he resigned from the Academy. However, his father helped him obtain a commission as an Infantry officer in 1839. Armistead’s career from that point on was similar to many other officers of his day. He served with distinction in Mexico, the Great Plains, Kansas, Utah and California.

As the war clouds built and various southern states seceded from the Union numerous officers from the South were torn between their oath, their friendships and their deep loyalty to their home states and families. In the end most Southern officers resigned their commissions, many with mixed feelings and quite often sadness. A large minority, some “40 to 50 per cent of Southern West Point graduates on active duty in 1860 held on to their posts and remained faithful to the Union.” [8] The most prominent of these men were General Winfield Scott and Major General George Thomas, the “Rock of Chickamauga.” Likewise Union Brigadier General John Buford’s family in Kentucky supported the Confederacy. For those southern officers who remained loyal to the Union to was often at a great personal cost. Thomas’s action cost him his relationship with his immediate family who deemed him to be a traitor. He and others were pilloried and demonized in the basest ways by many in the South. Some Southerners who served the Union were executed when they were captured. George Pickett, who called for his fellow Virginian Thomas’ death ordered 22 North Carolinians who he captured fighting for the Union in Kinston North Carolina to be executed. Pickett was not alone in such sentiments.

**Brigadier General Lewis Armistead CSA**
However, for most it was different. As talk of secession and war heated up officers stationed on the frontier debated the issues and asked each other what they would do if war came. In California Armistead and other officers asked Hancock, who was a Democrat and not openly hostile to the South, advice on what he would do if war came. Hancock’s reply was simple. “I shall not fight upon the principle of state-rights, but for the Union, whole and undivided” [9]

The parting came in 1861. When it was apparent that many officers would be resigning and heading home to join their state’s forces the Hancock’s hosted a going away party for their friends. Almira Hancock wrote of the party that “Hearts were filled with sadness over the surrendering of life-long ties.” [10] Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston’s wife Eliza went to a piano and sang sentimental songs such as Mary of Argyle and the popular Irish song Kathleen Mavourneen. [11] Almira Hancock wrote “Those songs…will ever be remembered by survivors of that mournful gathering.” [12]

“Mavourneen, Mavourneen, my sad tears are falling, to think that from Erin and thee I must part! It may be for years, and it may be forever, Then why art thou silent, thou voice of my heart?”

The parting was especially emotional for Armistead who had been a friend of the Hancock’s for 17 years. They had helped in following the death of both of his wives and children. He was tearful. He put his arm on his friend’s shoulder as he said: “Hancock, good-by; you can never know what this has cost me, and I hope God will strike me dead if I am ever induced to leave my native soil, should worse come to worse.” [13] As he departed Armistead gave a wrapped Bible and Prayer book to Almira Hancock, in case of his death, inscribed were the words “Trust in God and fear nothing.” [14]

Armistead led his brigade during the Peninsula campaign and battles around Richmond and his brigade was decimated in Lee’s failed assault on prepared Federal positions at Malvern Hill. Armistead did not endear himself to many of the volunteer officers who served in the Confederate ranks. One of his Colonels resigned over Armistead’s supposedly harsh treatment to which Armistead replied: “I have felt obliged to speak to him as one military man would to another and as I have passed nearly all my life in camps my manner may not be understood or appreciated by one who has been all his life a civilian.” [15] Armistead’s words can easily be understood by military professionals whose lives have been shaped in a different manner than their civilian counterparts.

At Gettysburg Armistead spoke his fears about the charge to his comrades. One was Brigadier General Dick Garnett, another of Armistead and Hancock’s comrades from the California days on the night of July 2nd. Garnett’s career had paralleled that Armistead, the same age Garnett struggled at West Point in his third year “he failed and withdrew. Taking the same courses again during the next term, he finished fourteenth among his new classmates, then graduated in 1841 standing 29th of fifty-two graduates.” [16]

Armistead and Garnett served together in the Sixth Infantry for most of their careers. They were promoted at similar times, a pattern of promotion that continued into their Confederate service. The next afternoon, the two friends who had served together so long and whose careers were so similar led their brigades of Pickett’s Division across the valley between Seminary Ridge and
Cemetery Ridge against their friend and comrade Winfield Scott Hancock’s II Corps which was defending Cemetery Ridge.

Garnett had to lead his brigade on foot, having been injured during the army’s march to Gettysburg. During the engagement Garnett was killed just before reaching the Union lines and Hancock gravely wounded. Armistead, lead the remnants of his decimated brigade to the Stone Wall, near the Copse of Trees. He rallied his troops fearing that some were faltering calling out: “Come on boys, give them the cold steel! Who will follow me?” [17] His troops breached the Union line and his black hat atop his sword led his troops forward. He reached the now unmanned artillery of Cushing’s battery and called to his remaining men “The day is ours men, come and turn this artillery on them.” [18] It was then that he met more Federal troops who unleashed a volley of musket fire that cut down many of the survivors. Armistead was wounded in the right arm and shoulder and fell near one of the Union artillery pieces, a point now known as “The High Water Mark” of the Confederacy.

As Armistead lay wounded he was approached by Major Bingham of Hancock’s staff. Bingham, a Mason noticed that Armistead was making a Masonic sign of distress. When Bingham told Armistead of Hancock’s injury Armistead was grieved and told Bingham to “Say to General Hancock for me that I have done him, and you all, an injury, which I shall always regret.” [19]

The meaning of those words is debated, especially by Southerners who cherish the myth of the Lost Cause. However, based on Armistead’s conduct and behavior in the time before he left California, it is not unreasonable to assume that as he lay dying he truly regretted what he had done. Armistead died from infections caused by his wounds which were initially not thought to be life threatening. A Union surgeon described him as: “seriously wounded, completely exhausted, and seemingly broken-spirited.” [20]

Garnett’s body was never found and was probably buried in a mass grave with other Confederate soldiers and was likely taken after the war to his native Virginia “together with thousands of unidentified bodies from Gettysburg, for burial in Richmond’s Hollywood Cemetery.” [21] Armistead was buried by a member of the 107th Ohio near the XI Corps field hospital. About a month later a physician from Philadelphia tracked down the soldier and “dug up the “Rough box” containing the body and embalmed poor Armistead’s remains for sale to grieving family members.” [22] Armistead’s family buried the remains in Old Saint Paul’s Cemetery in Baltimore.

Robert Krick wrote: “Death on adjacent bits of blood soaked ground in Adams County, Pennsylvania, yielded a final common thread, that of indignity: Lewis Armistead’s corpse wound up a hostage to petty human greed, while Dick Garnett’s entirely disappeared.” [23] Hancock’s injuries were severe, but he recovered. He would go on to continued fame and be one of the most admired and respected leaders of the Army during and after the war. He was gracious as a victor and spoke out against reprisals committed against Southerners after the war.

In 1880 Hancock was the Democratic nominee for President. He lost a close election to James Garfield, losing the popular vote by fewer than 40,000 votes. It was an era of great political corruption and Hancock was one of the few major public figures viewed favorably for his
integrity. Even his political opponents respected him for his integrity and honesty. Former President Rutherford B Hayes said:

“if when we make up our estimate of a public man, conspicuous both as a soldier and in civil life, we are to think first and chiefly of his manhood, his integrity, his purity, his singleness of purpose, and his unselfish devotion to duty, we can truthfully say of Hancock that he was through and through pure gold.” [24]

A few years after his death Republican General Francis A Walker, lamenting the great corruption of the time said:

“Although I did not vote for General Hancock, I am strongly disposed to believe that one of the best things the nation has lost in recent years has been the example and the influence of that chivalric, stately, and splendid gentleman in the White House. Perhaps much which both parties now recognize as having been unfortunate and mischievous during the past thirteen years would have been avoided had General Hancock been elected.” [25]

The story of Hancock, Armistead and Garnett is one that reminds us of the depth of friendships that many military professionals develop and cherish. It is also a story that reminds us of how hardened ideologues can divide a nation to the point of civil war. It is a story that should give pause to any political or spiritual leader that incites people to war against their neighbor and uses their ideology to slander, demean or even enslave and brutalize their political opponents.

The blood of the approximately 50,000 soldiers that were killed or wounded during the three days of the Battle of Gettysburg is ample reminder of the tragedy of war, especially war that forces the dearest of friends to fight and even kill one another.