

# Death

DEATH SWIRLED through American society during the Civil War. The word haunted letters and diaries. Names of the dead clogged newspaper columns. Corpses littered battlefields.

"Saw many of the enemies dead lying around not more than half covered. The ground in many places was white as snow with creeping worms," wrote Iowa soldier Cyrus Boyd. On another day he wrote, "This evening I went over North to see the Rebel grave yard where lie buried 2500 Confederate soldiers. . . . They have been buried in trenches and laid one above another and some places are seven deep."

Though death was familiar terrain to 19th-century Americans, the Civil War was a cataclysm, marking "the first time in American history in which large numbers of young men died (mangled and torn) far from their homes," writes historian Mark Schantz.

The country, writes historian Drew Gilpin Faust, was a "republic of suffering." The enormity of death forced Americans to "embark on a new relationship



with death," she says. "It violated prevailing assumptions about life's proper end—about who should die, when and where, and under what circumstances."

"Dying well" and the "good death" had long been ideals of American culture, Faust explains, in which one died at home, surrounded by family. Dying well implied a worthy life, an acceptance of death, and a final reconciliation with God. The last words of the dying were precious insights and lessons for the living. Preparing and burying the body were rituals of respect and dignity, as were adhering to mourning customs and prescribed periods of grief.

Contrast this ideal with a soldier's death far from



Top: "Here's a health to the next one that dies," by field artist Alfred Waud. Above: Union soldiers prepare to bury comrades.

home, surrounded by carnage and agony rather than family. Fellow soldiers, doctors, chaplains, and nurses wrote letters to the bereaved family describing how “a calm repose” had come over the dying soldier, how his final moments revealed a worthy, patriotic man of courage and honor who had willingly sacrificed his life for the cause. Enclosing something tangible—a lock of hair, a diary, even a bullet—memorialized his sacrifice and gave the family a cherished keepsake. Perhaps this was as close to the ideal of the good death as Americans could now hope for.

Hasty, haphazard burials denied the soldier a decent burial, and the family, closure. “Burial was, of necessity, performed by fatigue parties from the line and little or no provision could be made for any systematic interment of remains during a campaign or rapid movement,” remarks Therese Sammartino, an expert on national cemeteries. Iowan Marvin Varner wrote, “It Seems to be very trobelsom to get the Dead Deacently Intered as fast as they die. Several are dieing Every day.”

Iowan Philip Goode described how “the Secesh buried at the corner of our tent is beginning to emit a very disagreeable odor. We had some more dirt thrown on him today. I suppose he was not put more than a foot under ground. That is the way the boys buried them. Our own men they put a little deeper and stick up a board to mark the spot.”

Henry Clay McArthur wrote: “Saw where 33 rebs were burried in and . . . where 24 of our men were burried the secesh feet were sticking out another place the men dug up two sculls of rebs ones brain was not dried up yet.”

Families who wanted the remains shipped home could sometimes purchase air-tight coffins and India-rubber body bags, which were advertised in newspapers, and hire itinerant embalmers, who traveled from one battlefield or field hospital to another. Iowa soldier Martin Varner noted in his diary, “After considerabel trobel we succeeded in obtaining a metallick line coffin in which we placed the Body of William Warrick and Exprest it to Albia in care of Mrs. Wm. Warrick his companion.”

Hundreds of thousands of war dead were never shipped home but were buried near troop concentrations, hospitals, and sites of conflict. Proper identification of bodies and record keeping, especially after a battle, were monumental tasks, and often impossible. Soldiers were not issued identification tags, although

they could buy their own. In any case, as Faust reminds us, cannon fire mostly “obliterated” men.

The national cemetery system began in 1862. Commanding generals were assigned to designate land for burials, with “headboards to the graves bearing numbers, and when practicable, the names of the persons buried in them.” Part of the city cemetery in Keokuk, Iowa, was allotted for soldiers’ graves. The town was a staging area for troops and the site of army hospitals.

According to Sammartino, in Keokuk and dozens of other sites, “burial grounds that first presented an unsightly appearance of bare mounded graves” with wooden grave markers were transformed into na-



The national cemetery at the site of Andersonville prison in Georgia.

tional cemeteries similar to “stately parks, adorned with shrubs, trees, graveled paths, and driveways and vistas of shaded greensward carpeting the mounded graves.”

These national cemeteries, “where men of varied backgrounds and means were memorialized side by side, with uniform markers,” says one historian, “set these areas very much apart from secular cemeteries of the day.” Creation of these new sacred spaces was a “striking act of democracy.”

—by Ginalie Swaim

NOTE ON SOURCES

Sources include Drew Gilpin Faust, “The Civil War Soldier and the Art of Dying,” *Journal of Southern History* 67 (Feb. 2001), and *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*; “A Pretty Hard Business’: The Civil War Diary of Philip H. Goode,” transcribed by Edward W. Vollertsen, *Palimpsest* (Summer 1991); Therese T. Sammartino, “Civil War Era National Cemeteries,” National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, National Park Service, 1994; James M. Schmidt, “A Multiplicity of Ingenious Articles’: Civil War Medicine and *Scientific American Magazine*,” in *Years of Change and Suffering*; and Dorothy Denneen Volo and James M. Volo, *Daily Life in Civil War America*.