The Angel of the Wheatfield

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Gettysburg Magazine, Number 52, January 2015, pp. 69-73 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/get.2015.0009

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The Angel of the Wheatfield

J. KEITH JONES

There was an angel in the Wheatfield of Gettysburg, just as there had been on Marye’s Heights overlooking Fredericksburg seven months earlier. The compassion of this angel resulted in a symbolic bridge between a divided people. On a hot July day in 1863 two enemies became devoted, lifelong friends. One act of compassion bound these men together and captured the hearts of a nation.

On the second day of the great battle, July 2, 1863, Lt. James Jackson Purman and his best friend, Orderly Sgt. James Milton Pipes, along with their regiment, had been fighting for control of the Wheatfield for two hours against the Georgia brigade of Brig. Gen. William Wofford. The two men were members of the Greene County Rifles, which had become Company A of the 140th Pennsylvania. They had grown up together in Greene County, Pennsylvania, and were students at Waynesburg College when they answered the call for troops. All the field officers of the regiment had been lost; and finding themselves surrounded on three sides, the 140th was being forced into a disorderly retreat.1

The two men paused to lean against a rock to catch their breath. Purman spotted Confederate troops closing in on them through the woods. As they resumed their retreat, another man, John Buckley of Mercer County, Pennsylvania, called out to them for help from the ground. Purman and Pipes took hold of him and placed the man between two rocks. Their brave act came at a high price. They bade Buckley farewell and turned to run. The two were confronted by Confederates, who ordered them to halt. Purman, fearing capture, took flight and soon cried out, “I’m struck!” as he fell among the wheat, having been shot about four inches above his left ankle. The ball entered from the side and shattered both bones of his lower leg. He described the sensation of being shot: “At first there is no pain, smarting, nor anguish. It is very like the shock of an electric battery. But that delusion soon passes and the acute pain follows, and you know that a missle [sic] has passed through the tender flesh of your body.”2

Pipes was also wounded in the leg. His less severe injury allowed him to hobble off the field using his rifle as a crutch. There, he was taken prisoner by Confederate flankers. Purman lay on the field watching, as a Confederate regiment charged over him. Looking up, he saw the words “24th Georgia” on the flag going past. Night fell, and Purman lay among the wheat, listening to the cries of those about him. Sunrise revealed that Purman was trapped between the lines, with only the stalks of wheat and undulations of the field to protect him. As the sun climbed above the horizon, the gunfire of the previous day was renewed with shots being exchanged between the Pennsylvania Reserves and the Twenty-Fourth Georgia Infantry. A wounded Michigander called to Purman for water. Purman offered his canteen of whiskey and attempted to toss it, but it landed between them. The Michigan man was struck a second time when he tried for the canteen.

“Nothing could be seen except a line of blue on one side and gray on the other, and nothing heard

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Lt. James Jackson Purman and Orderly Sgt. James Milton Pipes, in the 140th Pennsylvania, part of Zook’s brigade, Caldwell’s division, Hancock’s Second Corps. The Union attempt to hold the Wheatfield is not going well. The Pennsylvania regiment has started to withdraw, being pressed by Wofford and Kershaw from the west and Semmes and Anderson from the south. Lt. Thomas P. Oliver, an officer in the Twenty-Fourth Georgia of Wofford’s brigade, will play a major role in this story. Map by Phil Laino.

but the crack of the rifles and the zip of the bullets in the wheat, or their well-known thud in the ground or the body of a wounded man,” Purman said. His hopes diminished rapidly after being struck a second time in the other leg. Thirst and blood loss threatened to overtake him. The Confederate line was much closer than the Union’s, and Purman spotted a soldier in gray beyond Confederate lines.

“I am twice wounded and am dying out here. Won’t you bring me a canteen of water?” Purman called out. The Confederate said that he was afraid

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3 Stewart, History of the One Hundred and Fortieth Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers, 427.

4 Stewart, History of the One Hundred and Fortieth Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers, 427.
that the Federals would concentrate their fire on him, believing he was robbing the wounded Yankee. Purman offered a safe route, saying, “Crawl through the tangled wheat and you will not be seen from our side.”

The young Confederate was Thomas P. Oliver from Banks County, Georgia. He entered the Confederate army on August 24, 1861, as a fifth sergeant; and by the time of his involvement at Gettysburg, he had been promoted to second lieutenant. Purman appealed to Oliver’s sense of fairness by saying that he had saved Confederates at Chancellorsville by giving them water. Oliver filled a canteen from Plum Run and began the dangerous crawl into the Wheatfield, as he had promised Purman. When Oliver reached Purman, he gave him what the wounded soldier described as “the sweetest water I ever had tasted.”

Oliver’s mission and promise were now fulfilled. Knowing this, Purman took the next step and urged the Georgian to carry him back to the Confederate lines. Purman no longer feared capture. He now realized that it was his only hope for survival. “This is a pretty hard place for a man to lie, between two fires. Can’t you carry me out to where your line is posted on the edge of the woods?” he asked.

“The way the balls are flying, if I should attempt to lift you up we would both be killed,” Oliver attempted to reason with the suffering northerner.

Purman realized that being left behind in the Wheatfield would likely amount to death. “Well, let me get on your back and you crawl off the way you came,” he rationalized. Purman’s persistence won out, and Oliver positioned the man on his back. About halfway to the woods, Purman told Oliver that he could not hold on any longer. He lost consciousness and slipped from Oliver’s back. Oliver crawled away with his canteen, and for most soldiers that would have been the end of the story. But Oliver instead refilled the canteen in Plum Run and crawled back to Purman. He splashed water in Purman’s face to revive him, placed him on his back again, and crawled the rest of the way back to Confederate lines. He put Purman on a rubber blanket under a tree and gave him a canteen full of water and some biscuits. Then Oliver had to leave.

The Pennsylvania Reserves would soon mount an attack and drive the Georgians back. The Confederates abandoned the field, leaving the captured Purman and Pipes to be recovered by their fellow Pennsylvania troops. At nine o’clock that night, Purman was taken to a hospital in a barn at the base of Little Round Top. His left leg was amputated the next morning, July 4; and he was sent to the home of Samuel Witherow in Gettysburg to recover. There, he was cared for by Witherow’s daughter Mary. Mary fell in love with the wounded soldier, and the two married.

Both Purman and Pipes were awarded the Medal

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5 Stewart, History of the One Hundred and Forty-First Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers, 427.
6 Stewart, History of the One Hundred and Forty-First Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers, 427.

of Honor for their action in the Wheatfield. Purman's citation read, “Voluntarily assisted a wounded comrade to a place of apparent safety while the enemy were in close proximity; he received the fire of the enemy and a wound which resulted in the amputation of his left leg.”

For Purman the war was over, but James M. Pipes would return to active combat. A little over a year later, on August 25, 1864, Pipes lost an arm fighting at Reams Station, which was also noted in his Medal of Honor citation: “while commanding a skirmish line, voluntarily assisted in checking a flank movement of the enemy, and while so doing was severely wounded, suffering the loss of an arm.” Pipes went on to serve as county treasurer of Marshall County, West Virginia, and as West Virginia's fourth secretary of state, from 1869–1871. He also was a member of the state Constitutional


Convention. Like his friend Purman, he would end up working the bulk of his career in government service in Washington DC.

Thomas P. Oliver, whose identity was still unknown to Purman, was promoted to first lieutenant and served as the adjutant for the Twenty-Fourth Georgia. He remained with the Confederate army and was part of Lee's surrender at Appomattox Courthouse. Following the war, Purman resolved to find his rescuer, and in 1874 he used his memories of seeing the colors of the Twenty-Fourth Georgia and a single bar of lace on the collar of the soldier to track him down. He reached out to Rep. Garnett McMillan and Sen. Alexander Stephens of Georgia to assist him, and they found Oliver.

Purman completed his education after leaving the army and became a professor at Monongahela College. He would then go on to study law; and by the time he began his search for Oliver, he was working in Washington DC. He and Oliver then began a long-term correspondence. A number of years later, Purman hoped to host his friend for the inauguration of Theodore Roosevelt in 1901. These plans fell through, but the two finally met in 1907, when Oliver extended his trip to the United Confederate Veterans reunion in Richmond, marking the first time they laid eyes on one another since that fateful hot day in the Wheatfield. During Oliver’s visit, J. J. Purman finally got to introduce his friend to President Teddy Roosevelt.

The Athens Banner newspaper tracked this story for years, first reporting on March 5, 1901, of the invitation, then following up on March 16 with Purman's full account of his rescue. The story attained national prominence with the Banner publishing a poem written in honor of Oliver on March 29 by Union veteran Charles Gerritson of Boston. The Banner noted that Oliver had received numerous letters of this nature from across the country.

Finally on May 31, 1907, the Banner was once again filled with anticipation at the announcement of Thomas Oliver's planned reunion with J. J. Purman. On June 4 the meeting was headline news. The rescue was detailed again, and they concluded with this statement from Purman: “For the brave
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and generous act of this ‘Old Reb’ Thomas P. Oliver, adjutant 24th Georgia Infantry, I shall ever hold a warm spot in my heart; I love him.”

According to Athens, Georgia, resident Col. Thomas Shackleford, Oliver made as big of an impression on the people of Washington DC as he had at home. Shackleford reported that while there on business he was constantly plied with questions about Oliver once people discovered his hometown.

After the war, Oliver had moved from his native home in the tiny town of Homer in Banks County to Athens, where he spent many years as a merchant and later served as deputy clerk of the Superior Court for Clarke County, Georgia. In 1907 Oliver took a new step in his life and ran for alderman of his district in Athens. He won election to the seat in November, but he passed away from a sudden illness on December 7, before the beginning of his term.

On December 11 the Banner reported that Dr. J. J. Purman lay dying in Washington DC. He had undergone surgery because of his old war wound. It reported, “[I]t is not believed that he can possibly survive,” and that “[i]t is quite likely that he will soon join his confederate friend, who stood by him when he needed friendship, in the everlasting bivouac beyond the skies.”

If the story had ended the way it was expected, this certainly would have presented a poetic book-end. But Purman’s toughness won out again, and he lived until May 10, 1915. Purman and Pipes both lie buried in Arlington National Cemetery; Oliver, in Oconee Hill Cemetery in Athens.

On December 13, 1862, Sgt. Richard Kirkland of the Second South Carolina jumped over the stone wall on Mayre’s Heights overlooking Fredericksburg, Virginia, loaded with full canteens. No longer able to withstand the cries of the wounded, Kirkland risked his life to give them water. Thinking he was robbing or otherwise abusing the wounded, Union sharpshooters targeted Kirkland. Once they determined his real intentions, they held their fire. Kirkland entered the field loaded with water-filled canteens and left with the satisfaction of having helped the suffering. For this he became known as the Angel of Mayre’s Heights. Half a year later another angel entered a hotly contested battleground. Thomas Parks Oliver crawled into the Wheatfield with a full canteen and crawled out with a devoted friend. Their friendship reached beyond their own communities. It not only touched their own lives but, in fact, proved to be emblematic of the healing of national wounds and the coming together of a divided people.

J. Keith Jones is an award-winning author and a native of Georgia who now lives in North Carolina. A graduate of the University of South Carolina, he is the author of The Boys of Diamond Hill: The Lives and Civil War Letters of the Boyd Family of Abbeville County, South Carolina (Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2011), which received a gold medal from the Military Writers Society of America in 2012. He is also the author of Georgia Remembers Gettysburg: A Collection of First-Hand Accounts Written by Georgia Soldiers (Gettysburg PA: Ten Roads, 2013), recounting more than eighty firsthand accounts of Georgia’s soldiers in the famous battle, which also received a gold medal from MWSA in 2014.

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11 Athens (Ga) Banner, June 4, 1907; see also issues of the Athens (Ga) Banner from March 5, 22, and 29, 1901, and May 31, 1907.
12 Athens (Ga) Banner, December 11, 1907.