

I Am Their Flag

In 1861, when they perceived their rights to be threatened, when those who would alter the form of government of their forefathers were placed in charge of that government, when confronted with more change than they could accept,

The Mighty Men of Valor began to gather.

This band of brothers, native to the Southern soil, pledged themselves to a cause; the cause of defending family, and fireside, and faith.

Between the desolation of war and their homes they interposed their bodies and they chose me as their symbol.

I am their flag.

Wives, mothers, sweethearts took scissors, thimbles, needles and thread

And from silk or cotton or whatever was the best they possessed-even from the fabric of their wedding dresses-they cut my pieces and stitched my seams.

I am their flag.

All over the South, at courthouse squares, at train stations, at picnic groves, the men mustered and the women placed me in their hands.

"Fight hard," they said, "win if you can, come back to me if at all possible, but above all else, sirs, you will maintain your honor, for this is your symbol.

I am their flag.

They flocked to the training camps and the drill fields; they endured that wrenching sadness of leaving home.

They tolerated poor food, bad quarters, boredom, illness, homesickness, and through it all they looked to me for inspiration.

I am their flag.

I was at Sumter when they began in jubilation, I was at Big Bethel when the infantry fired their first volleys,

I smelled the gun-smoke along the banks of Bull Run in Virginia and at Belmont on the shores of the Mississippi.

I led Jackson back down the Shenandoah, I was in the debacle at Fort Donelson, for seven days I flapped in the turgid breezes of the James River bottoms as McClellan ran from before Richmond.

Sidney Johnston died for me at Shiloh, as would hundreds and thousands of others whose graves are marked, to this day, as Sine Nomine, without a name, unknown.

I am their flag.

With ammunition gone they defended me along the railroad cut at Second Manassas by throwing rocks, I saw the fields turn red at Sharpsburg, brave men carried me across Doctors Creek at Perryville.

I saw blue bodies carped Maryes Heights at Fredericksburg, I saw grey bodies fall like leaves in the Round Forest at Murfreesboro,

I am their flag.

I was a shroud for Ole Stonewall after Chancellorsville. Men ate rats and mule meat to keep me flying over Vicksburg. I tramped across the wheat field at Gettysburg with Kemper, and Armistead, and Garnett.

I know the thrill of victory, I know the misery of defeat. I know the cost in human blood of both.

I am their flag.

When Longstreet broke the lines at Chickamauga I was in the lead, I was the last one off Lookout Mountain, men died to rescue me at Missionary Ridge.

I was singed with the wildfire which burned to death the wounded in the Wilderness, shot to tatters at the Bloody Angle at Spotsylvania,

Saw it all from Dalton to Peachtree Creek, and no worse places did I ever see than at Kennesaw Mountain and at New Hope Church.

They planted me over the trenches at Petersburg and there I stayed for nearly nine months.

I am their flag.

I was rolled in blood at Franklin, stiff with ice at Nashville, many good men bade me "Farewell" at Saylor's Creek.

When the end came at Appomattox, when the last Johnny Reb left Durham Station, hundreds of them hid fragments of my fabric about their persons

I am their flag.

During the long years we call Reconstruction, during the misery and despair that so slowly passed, the veterans, their wives, their sons and daughters,

They loved me, and they kept alive the stories of heroism, the tales of bravery, and passed them on to their children, and they to theirs, and they to theirs,

And now those stories are committed to you.

I am their flag.

I have shrouded the bodies of heroes, I have been laved in the blood of martyrs, I am enshrined in the hearts of millions, both living and dead.

The Daughters salute me with affection and reverence, the Sons pledge undying devotion in their hearts, for I am part of your history, I am part of your heritage, I do not belong in the hands of those who hate.

I am the living reminder of the valor of your flesh and blood-the blood which nourishes us.

Look away, Dixie Land,

I am their flag.

Michael R. Bradley holds a Ph. D. in History from Vanderbilt and retired in May after a career of 36 years as professor of U. S. History with a Board of Regents college here in Tennessee. He is the author of several books on the Civil War, including, "Tullahoma: The 1863 Campaign to Control Middle Tennessee"; "With Blood and Fire: Behind Union Lines in Middle Tennessee"; and (just published) "Nathan Bedford Forrest's Escort and Staff". He is a Life Member, Sons of Confederate Veterans, Camp #155.