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The Britons who died for the Stars and Stripes

When civil war broke out in America in 1861, the British Government tried to stay neutral. But thousands of ordinary Britons volunteered to fight, in a conflict of unprecedented ferocity. Historian Amanda Foreman considers their forgotten contribution

At the height of the battle, sparks from artillery shells lit the underbrush, transforming the scrubby wilderness into a roaring furnace. Men from both sides of the war were trapped together. Soldiers could see their comrades waving frantically at them from inside the inferno. The scene was so horrific that enemies joined forces to rescue the doomed men. Two foes fought together to try to save a trapped youth. "The fire was all around him," recalled one. They could see his face: "His eyes were big and blue, and his hair like raw silk surrounded by a wreath of fire. I heard him scream: 'Oh Mother, Oh God.'" The two men burned their arms trying to pull him out of the flames and were forced to retreat. They watched helplessly as the screaming boy turned into a human torch.



Robert E. Lee, leader of the Confederates

It was May 1863, two years into the American Civil War which had pitched President Abraham Lincoln and his anti-slavery North (the Federals) against the pro-slavery South (the Confederates). And this battle – the Battle of Chancellorsville – was meant to be Lincoln's crushing blow against the South. But although the Northern public was thirsting for victory, it did not come that day. "Fighting Joe" Hooker, Lincoln's hand-picked general, was taken by surprise, and his army was slaughtered in the impenetrable Virginia woodland known as the Wilderness. One man caught up in the carnage was Henry George Hore, an ordinary bank clerk from Sussex who had sailed to the US in April to join the Northern army. He was appalled as he watched the mounting fatalities. "Good God, my dear girl, it was awful," he wrote to his cousin, Olivia, back home in England. "The dead seemed piled heaps upon heaps." That day Hore killed a man for the first time. It was a Southerner whom he had seen plunge a sword into the chest of one of his close friends. "Killing him did not take 30 seconds. I sighted him along the barrel of my revolver and if I had not killed him the first time would have shot him again."

The American Civil War was unspeakably brutal, and the number of casualties unprecedented. The conflict was the first to rely on the deadly technology of modern warfare: submarines, machine guns, aerial surveillance, trains, trenches and land mines. The four-year struggle between the North and the South, from 1861 to 1865, would cost the lives of more than 620,000 soldiers and 50,000 civilians. Even to this day, the defeated South bears the emotional scars of the war, and its people discuss the conflict as if it were a recent occurrence. What is never acknowledged, however, is the pivotal role played by Britain in the war – or the fact that tens of thousands of Britons took part. Some lost their lives in horrific circumstances; others witnessed unimaginable levels of butchery and torture.

"Irish labourers vented their anger on free blacks. By the evening there were bodies swinging from lamp posts all over New York"

The result was that thousands of Britons disobeyed the Government's neutrality injunction against volunteering for either side. Anti-slavery protesters and mercenaries in the main joined the North. Idealists who saw the "plucky" Southern states as the underdog fighting for independence, along with soldiers of fortune, signed up with the South. To the North's fury, merchant ships regularly sailed from Liverpool to the South, running past the Federal blockade of Southern ports, to bring guns and supplies to the Confederates. The Confederates also took advantage of legal loopholes to commission half a dozen warships from British shipyards.

The list of British volunteers includes famous individuals such as the explorer (and finder of Dr Livingstone) Henry Morton Stanley, who initially fought for the South, and the celebrated actor Sir Charles Wyndham, who chose the North. But there were scores of less celebrated but courageous men and women – such as Hore – who volunteered their services right from the beginning. The first major battle of the war, the Battle of Bull Run in July 1861, had regiments on both sides that were made up almost entirely of British volunteers. Two famous New York regiments were called the Irish Brigade (Ireland was then under British rule) and the New York Highlanders, drawn from Scotland. There was even, for a short time, a regiment called the New York British Volunteers.

In the early stages of the war the Confederates of the South, under the brilliant General Robert E. Lee, appeared to have the upper hand. President Lincoln was so exasperated that he was sacking his generals faster than he could find their replacements. Lincoln was right to be worried. By 1863, the country was growing tired of the war, and not even two subsequent victories at Gettysburg

and Vicksburg could stem the national resentment against conscription, known as the Draft.

On 13 July 1863, riots against the Draft broke out in several cities, but the worst were in New York – where Irish labourers vented their anger on free blacks. A British military observer, Lt-Colonel Arthur Fremantle, recorded how he saw a crowd chase down a black man, shouting: “Down with the bloody nigger! Kill all niggers!” One black victim was dragged through the streets by his genitals. Another was stamped on, knifed and then hanged from a lamp post. Staff at the British Consulate managed to rescue Ann Anderson, a Barbadian ship’s cook, from the hands of the mob by dragging her inside and locking the doors. But by the evening there were bodies swinging from lamp posts all over the city.



Burying the dead in Cold Harbor, Virginia, 1864

The New York Hospital for Women and Children was threatened because its British founder, Dr Elizabeth Blackwell – the first woman to qualify as a doctor – insisted on treating all patients regardless of race. Dr Blackwell ordered the servants to close the shutters and bar the doors. Every light was extinguished, leaving the patients in darkness as the muffled but unmistakable shouts of a lynch mob torturing its victim could be heard through the walls. Some of the white patients became hysterical, begging Dr Blackwell to save the hospital by expelling the black occupants. She refused, and spent the night delivering the baby of one of the black patients.

Mobs prowled the waterfront, attacking British vessels known to have black crew members. The British Consul General telegraphed the British embassy in Washington for help. HMS Challenger was dispatched, but the warship would not reach New York for at least 24 hours. Fearing there would be mass slaughter by then, the consul asked the commander of a French frigate to allow British blacks in the city to take refuge on board. The French warship steamed into New York harbour, opened its gun ports to show the baying mob on the quay it meant business, and allowed 71 black British sailors aboard. There were two more days of anarchy until 10,000 US troops poured into the city. It wasn’t until midday on 16 July that Blackwell was able to unlock the doors of the hospital and resume business. Early estimates put the death toll at up to 1,000, and more than 300 buildings had been destroyed.

Such horrific scenes played into the hands of Southern propagandists in Britain, who claimed that white Northern hatred of blacks was far worse than the South’s paternalistic slavery system. As a result, increasing numbers of British volunteers rushed to the South’s cause. Captain Henry Wemyss Feilden, a former officer in the Black Watch and a decorated veteran of the Indian Mutiny, was one of them. He signed up to defend the city of Charleston

against repeated attempts by the US navy to capture it. By 1863 he was also madly in love with a Southern belle named Julia. “Whatever happens, if I am alive you will be protected,” he promised her. Feilden’s love for Julia remained steadfast, but his admiration for the South was severely dented in the summer of 1864 after Federal prisoners in Charleston were deployed as human shields, and placed in the middle of the strike zone of the Northern bombardment of the city.

The increasing cruelty of the war witnessed by Feilden was not only practised by the South, however. Mary Sophia Hill, a British schoolteacher who had become a Confederate nurse, suffered appalling brutality in a Federal prison after being falsely accused of espionage. “I often wonder since [how] I kept my senses for many have lost their reason for less cruelty,” she wrote. After being held for two months without charge, in total isolation inside a filthy dark cell, Mary was able to smuggle a letter to the British Ambassador Lord Lyons in Washington. Lord Lyons was already involved in a furious row with the US government over “crimping”: the practice of tricking or abducting British subjects – many of them tourists – into the army. Those who tried to escape suffered extreme punishments, including being subjected to water cannons to the point of drowning. Lyons also had reports of British subjects being hung by their thumbs until they confessed to desertion. Thanks to his campaign, the State Department grudgingly agreed to halt this inhuman treatment. Hundreds of British prisoners – including Mary Sophia Hill – were released or at least allowed to face trial.

But by then the South was on its knees. Robert E. Lee had met his match in US General Ulysses S. Grant. After a ten-month siege, Richmond – the capital of the Confederacy – fell to Grant on 3 April 1865. Lee surrendered a week later, and the war was over. Tragically, President Lincoln was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth just ten days later. US fury with Britain did not die down with the end of hostilities. The contribution of British volunteers to the North’s cause was forgotten. Instead, all Washington cared about was getting an apology and reparations for the depredations of those Confederate raiders built in British dockyards. After seven years of wrangling, the British Government agreed to pay the US \$15m in damages (£236m today). But the victory was not all one-way. The redoubtable Mary Sophia Hill sued the US government for false imprisonment in an international court – and won.

A longer version of this article first appeared in the Daily Mail. World on Fire: An Epic History of Two Nations Divided, by Amanda Foreman, is published by Allen Lane at £30. To buy from The Week bookshop for £25, call 0843-060 0020 or visit www.theweek.co.uk/books.

WEATHER

Coldest:
1°C (34°F)
at Tyndrum
(Stirlingshire),
Tue 28th

Driest:
A total of 2mm
(0.08in) fell
during the
week at St
Mary’s (Isles
of Scilly)



Wettest:
47mm (1.84 in) at
Turnhouse airport
(Edinburgh), Wed
22nd

Sunniest:
16.1h at Norwich
airport (Norfolk),
Sun 26th

Warmest:
33°C (92°F) at
Olympic Park
(London), Mon
27th

For the week that was:

Until Sat morning it was cool and unsettled over the UK, and it was very wet over most of Scotland last Wed, with falls of over 25mm occurring widely; the Central Belt was wettest, with 47mm at Turnhouse and 40mm at Salsburgh (Lanarkshire). Warm, tropical air flooded northwards across the country over the weekend, with 29.9°C on Sun and 33.3°C on Mon at the 2012 Olympics site in London – the highest temperature anywhere in the UK since July 2006. Thunderstorms broke out in many places on Mon and Tue, and by Tue afternoon most regions were some 10-15°C cooler.

Hurricane “Beatriz” brushed along the Pacific coast of Mexico early last week, with heavy seas reported from Acapulco northwards to the US border. Heavy seasonal rains led to extensive and serious flooding in several regions of the world, notably West Africa, the Philippines and Korea. In the Nigerian city of Kano, 24 people were reported drowned following the heaviest rains for 30 years.