

A General Befriends a Private

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.



Thomas Francis Meagher, participant in the Young Ireland Movement, is arrested in Ireland for sedition, never firing a shot, and is banned to Tasmania, Australia in 1848. He escapes and arrives in New York in 1852. Meagher becomes an American citizen just before the Civil War and Abraham Lincoln promotes him to Brigadier General and he commands the Irish Brigade.

By 1862, Meagher had participated in numerous battles but sometime after Fredericksburg, he falls into despair. This is at a time that Meagher's confidence was shattered. He lost so many people who were close to him...people he had personally recruited...whose mothers he had known from the old country...whose wives he had known...who he entertained just two nights before he had to see their dead faces. And this just about killed him. For him, this is at a low point of the civil war and things are not going well for the Union.

After Antietam, along the way to Fredericksburg, one person who became close to Thomas Meagher was a young man from the 116th Pennsylvania infantry named Private William McCarter. Meagher was so impressed with McCarter's extraordinary penmanship he made him one of his secretaries and ghostwriter. However, one-night McCarter noticed that Meagher, with a wild stare in his eye, is standing in front of this big bonfire supported by a tent pole. Meagher is very drunk and starts to slip and falls toward this giant blaze, private McCarter sees this, reacts quickly and holding out his musket where Meagher falls upon it. McCarter saves him from going into the fire. McCarter then carries the unconscious Meagher to his tent and puts him to bed. After a few hours Meagher came to – groggy and red-eyed – and one of his highest officers, both in rank and age, remarked to Meagher, “General, you owe your life to that private.” Meagher then develops a relationship with this boy. When the boy is wounded at Fredericksburg, he is sent off to Washington, D.C. to save his arm from amputation. During the Civil War the solution to every wound was to bring out the saw. Private McCarter has this giant open wound and suddenly a team of the best doctors appear at his hospital. They are taking special care of him. McCarter asks the doctors “Am I going to lose the arm?” The doctors flatly said, “No, you are not going to lose your arm.” They move him to his private room and they attend to him for ten days. They save his arm. It turns out that Meagher had gone behind the scenes to make sure this boy had the best medical care.



William McCarter had written a memoir “My Life in the Irish Brigade”, and states “to his honor and credit, I never saw General Meagher intoxicated again” after that incident. McCarter was impressed by Meagher and writes in his diary that “General Meagher presented an exceedingly neat and clean soldierly appearance, marked and admired by all. He was a gentleman of no ordinary ability. In thorough military skill and courage and bravery on the battlefield, he was second to none in the Army of the Potomac. He was the finest, most educated man I had ever saw put on a uniform.”

Thomas Francis Meagher would go off and speak and recite epic poems in Greek and Latin. He loved romance, he loved language, he loved the theater and he loved history...he probably did not love war.