

Pass It On®...

Never-ending Love.

A right worth fighting for, a marriage interrupted and a love that lasts forever: The story of Civil War hero Sullivan Ballou and his ultimate sacrifice still resonates today.

For the first time in world history, enlightened leaders were calling upon nations to end the evil of human bondage. The early 19th century saw anti-slavery movements boil over into conflict, from skirmishes in Great Britain and its outlying colonies to all-out Civil War in the young United States.

In the minds of abolitionists, the scourge of slavery would bring about the wrath of God, and a civilized people would never truly be free until all the inhabitants of the world were free. The turmoil of conscience spread across the United States, and fiery speeches ignited the fury of a population divided. Was slavery the divine order, or was it the God-given right of all human beings to be free?

Amid this tinderbox waiting for a flame was Sullivan Ballou, a 32-year-old attorney, viewed as a rising star in the political world, who believed strongly in the manifest freedom of all. He had a young family, a promising career and a conscience that would not be still. In 1861, he bid farewell to his family, expressing his deepest thoughts to his wife:

“If it is necessary that I should fall on the battle-field for any country, I am ready. I have no misgivings about, or lack of confidence in, the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter. ... and I am willing, perfectly willing to lay down all my joys in this life to help maintain this government, and to pay that debt.... Sarah, my love for you is deathless. It seems to bind me with mighty cables, that nothing but Omnipotence can break; and yet, my love of country comes over me like a strong wind, and bears me irresistibly on with all those chains, to the battlefield. ... my dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you, nor that, when my last breath escapes me on the battle-field, it will whisper your name.”

Ballou was stationed at Bull Run, the first battle of the Civil War after the Confederate Army fired on Fort Sumter. It was clear the Southern Army was going to be aggressive from the start, yet few foretold a long battle. Abraham Lincoln, hoping for

a quick end to the war, called upon “all loyal citizens to favor, facilitate and aid this effort to maintain the honor, the integrity and the existence of our National Union.”

Bull Run was anticipated mostly as pageantry between the two sides – until the shooting began. Picnickers watching from the hillside were horrified as bloody soldiers rushed toward them, leaving mayhem and carnage below. Neither side was militarily prepared, and they certainly were not ready for the number of wounded that needed care. Major Ballou directed his troops toward a hill and was soon swept up in the chaos. He was being fired upon from all sides, with many soldiers killed by friendly fire. He was struck in the leg by a cannonball and dragged to a makeshift surgeon’s tent. Medical science of the day had not yet discovered germ theory, and the hospital conditions were often more dangerous than bullets and cannonballs. Days later, Major Ballou succumbed to his wounds and died in the hospital.

The reality of the war fell upon the nation like a dark plague. Overcoming centuries of slavery would require the bloody sacrifice of over half a million soldiers and their families. In his second inaugural address, Lincoln’s reflections on the long war led him to the conclusion that the war was a sin to be paid for by both sides and finished with a call for peace: “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan – to do all which may achieve and cherish as just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

The words must have seemed little consolation to Sarah, the grieving widow. She never remarried and kept the flame of her love for Ballou alive until the day she died, at last reunited after keeping his words in her heart for 56 years: “I shall always be near you in the garish day, and the darkest night amidst your happiest scenes and gloomiest hours always, always, and if the soft breeze fans your cheek, it shall be my breath; or the cool air cools your throbbing temples, it shall be my spirit passing by. Sarah, do not mourn me dear; think I am gone, and wait for me, for we shall meet again.”

And so they surely did.

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