

The individual motives
for why men fought in
the American Civil War
were personally
unique to every
soldier...

*"I have
no desire to
return until
this war is
settled"*

The Motives and Sacrifice of Sgt. Paul Kuhl
15th New Jersey Volunteers by William R. Griffith IV

“ . . . I believe we are happier here, with the consciousness of doing our duty by our country, than those are who are sneaking at home, with fear of the draft dogging them at every step.”

*T*he individual motives for why men fought in the American Civil War were personally unique to every soldier. Some fought for patriotism, manhood, and freedom from bondage for others. Some fought simply because it was what everyone else was doing, or joined to avoid being drafted, all the while collecting a hefty enlistment bounty. James M. McPherson, in his ground-breaking study, *For Cause & Comrades: Why Men Fought In The Civil War*, argues that there was a reoccurring pattern of reasons why men took up arms during the conflict. After personally reading and analyzing over 25,000 letters and 250 private diaries from men on both sides, Dr. McPherson concluded that the most common motives were duty, honor, and patriotism.¹

Sergeant Paul Kuhl, Company A, 15th New Jersey Volunteers, exemplified this thesis and carried with him these ideals from August 1862 all the way until his death at the Battle of Spotsylvania Courthouse on May 12, 1864. His initial, sustaining, and combat motives are all evident in the letters written to his mother and siblings throughout the war. Unpublished and transcribed by a descendent, Kuhl’s letters give its readers an in-depth look into the young mind of a New Jersey farm boy turned soldier.

Paul Kuhl, the youngest of six children, was born to Leonard and Dorothy Kuhl in 1842. At the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, the family resided on a farm in Hunterdon County, New Jersey. In response to Abraham Lincoln’s July 1862 call for 300,000 volunteers, the recruitment office opened its doors in Flemington and a company of soldiers was recruited and organized by Captain Lambert Boeman—the husband of Paul’s sister, Henrietta. On August 25, 1862, Kuhl and these men were mustered into service as Company A, 15th New Jersey Volunteers.²

When Paul Kuhl enlisted during the summer of 1862, he did so with a feeling of obligation that it was his duty to join. “The consciousness of *duty* was pervasive in Victorian America,” argues James McPherson. “Victorians understood duty to be a binding moral obligation involving reciprocity: one had a duty to defend the flag under whose protection one had lived.”³ Paul Kuhl was no exception to this. In a letter to his sister, Mattie, from the VI Corps camp near White Oak Church, Virginia, Paul wrote that, “. . . I believe we are happier here, with the con[s]cioussness of doing our duty by our country, than those are who are sneaking at home, with fear of the draft dogging them at every step.”⁴ Only twenty-one-years old and already promoted to the rank of 1st sergeant, he believed that serving in the war was simply the right thing to do. The men who remained at home with “fear of the draft” were simply failing to fulfill their obligation and duty to the United States in its time of need.

*"I too hope I
may soon return
to my home, but
not until this
rebellion is
crushed will I
feel that I can
return, and hold
up my head as
a man."*

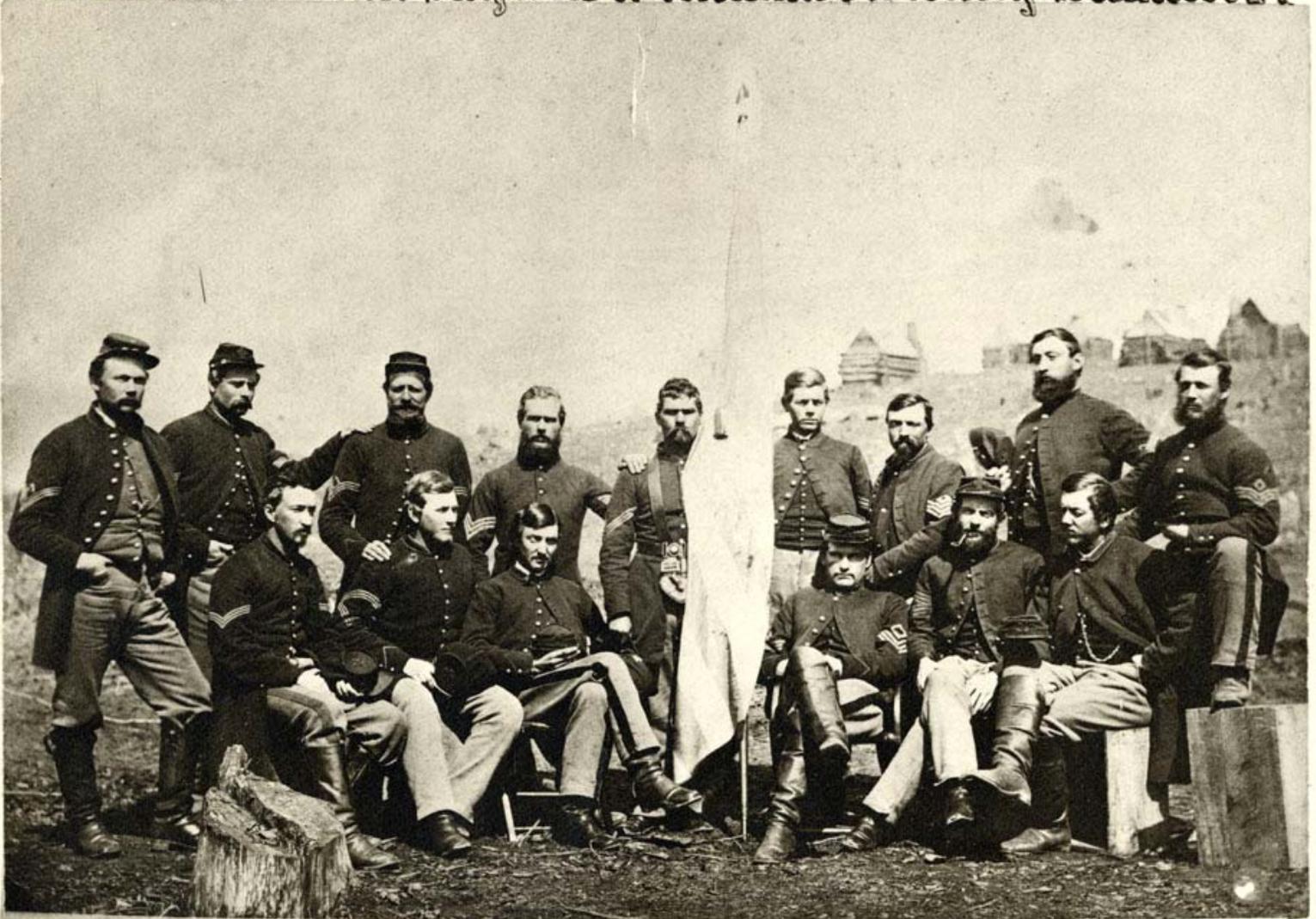
Although Paul Kuhl was very critical of the men who did not enlist when they had the chance to, he was content with the members of his family staying away from the war. Writing of his brother, Richard, who had chosen to remain at home and continue studying for the bar exam to become an attorney, Paul wrote that, ". . . scince [sic] it is impossible for him to serve his country on the battle field all he can do is do his duty at home and his reward will be the same."⁵ It is clearly evident here that Paul understood the danger of soldiering, and feared for his family's safety, exempting Richard from his harsh opinions against men who did not fight. In Paul's eyes, the war would also be a chance for him to bring honor to his name and family, all the while proving himself as a man.

Regarding the concept of "honor" during the Civil War, McPherson writes, "Duty and honor were closely linked to . . . masculinity in Victorian America. Boyhood was a time of preparation for manhood. And there could be no sterner test than war. It quite literally separated men from boys."⁶ Paul Kuhl understood that his honor and manhood would be at stake when he finally met the enemy on the battlefield. "I too hope I may soon return to my home," he wrote in February 1863, "but not until this rebellion is crushed will I feel that I can return, and hold up my head as a man."⁷ Two days later he wrote to Richard, ". . . there is no one in the army that desires to return home more than I, but when I do come I hope it may be in such a manner that I can both respect myself, and claim the respect of my friends."⁸ Paul Kuhl was full of self-respect and had tremendous faith in himself that he would not fall short of proving himself worthy to be called a man. He also held great pride that he was amongst the ranks of some of the best soldiers in the entire country.

Paul Kuhl was confident that the men of the 15th New Jersey would "never disgrace their colors . . . Every man feels it's his duty as a soldier and a patriot to defend them with his life," he assured his sister. "And if they lose their Colors through cowardice, it leaves a stigma on their name hard to wipe out."⁹ The regimental flag was the most meaningful symbol of unit pride and losing it would mean dishonor for all who fought below its colors. Honor to oneself and their comrades who they fought beside was a sustaining motive for Paul that he kept with him throughout the war. As long as one held honor dear, it did not "take the roughest customer in the world, to make the best soldier."¹⁰

He was not scared to face the Confederate Army on the battlefield—at least when he first enlisted. Kuhl's overwhelming aspiration to earn respect from his friends, family, and comrades kept the soldier hungry for a chance to prove himself as a man. When the time came and the men of the 15th New Jersey were forced to ante-up and do their duty as

Non Comd. Staff and First Sergeants of Fifteenth New Jersey Volunteers.



M.C. Van Gelder 1st Sgt Co. K
 J.H. Comings Sgt Co. I
 M.B. Skull Co. D (Sgt)
 1st Sgt E.B. Nicholas Co. B
 A.V. Wyckoff (Sergt Major)
 Sgt J. Van Houten Co. C
 M. Kline (Sergt Drum Corps)
 S. Rubadov - Paul Kuhl Co. A. (Color Sergt.)
 1st Sgt H.R. Merrill Co. H
 J. Van Antwerp Co. E
 W. Johnson (Gr. Thr. Sergt)
 E.G. Budd Co. F 1st Sgt
 J.R. McCaully (Actg Comd Sgt)
 1st Sgt W.E. Trimmer Co. G

"Non-Commissioned Staff and First Sergeants of Fifteenth New Jersey Volunteers"

Sgt. Paul Kuhl is in the back row standing fourth from the right. This photograph was taken near the VI Corps camp at Brandy Station, VA, just days before the Army of the Potomac commenced the Overland Campaign during the spring of 1864

soldiers, Paul was confident that they were “ready to meet the enemy and fight like men.”¹¹ Not only did Kuhl understand that his manhood was at stake, but also the fate of his beloved country.

“A large number of . . . men in blue and gray,” concluded James McPherson, “were intensely aware of the issues at stake and passionately concerned about them.”¹² It was a personally unique cause at stake for both sides: “[The war’s] outcome would determine the fate of the nation—two nations, if the Confederacy won. It would shape the future of American society and of every person in that society.”¹³ To Paul Kuhl, the main aim of the Union Army was to “conquer the traitors who are trying to destroy our beloved country.”¹⁴ This belief of enlisting in an army that would save the United States reoccurs throughout Kuhl’s letters home. Over and over again he writes of his “beloved country” and the hardships he is willing to endure if it can be saved. “Although we are in no want of incidents to remind us of the death that

“The works is still far from done, but with the help of a just God, we will yet conquer this wicked rebellion, And teach all traitors a lesson they will never forget.”

is staring us in the face, at every turn,” Kuhl wrote home in September 1863, “But which we are willing to brave for the sake of our country.”¹⁵ Again a month later he wrote, “. . . we could never be content at home, while the vile traitors of the south are trying to ruin our country.”¹⁶

His constant use of the word “traitors” to describe the Confederates is key to understanding his hatred against secessionists. It seems that in every letter he mentions the rebels, he always refers to them as traitors. “The works is still far from done,” he penned in a letter home November 6, 1863, “but with the help of a just God, we will yet conquer this wicked rebellion, And teach all traitors a lesson they will never forget.”¹⁷ As James McPherson had argued in *For Cause & Comrades*, like a majority of men who fought in the Civil War, Paul Kuhl understood what was at stake. He knew that the rebellion of the Confederate States threatened to destroy the country and everything that it once was. It was his patriotic duty that caused him to enlist, fight, and sustain throughout his service, but he was willing to give much more for his country if need be.

Paul understood that suffering and great sacrifice were required from him and many others if the country was to be saved. “Soldiering is not the life I would live, if I had the choice,” he admitted to his sister, “But for my country’s sake I will willingly endure far greater hardships than I have yet seen. If at last we may come out victorious.”¹⁸ Regarding the aspect of being wounded and permanently disabled in battle, Paul wrote home for his sister to:

*Tell Sue Higgins to wait for me, as I will need some one sadly, to civilize me, if I should lose two or three legs or arms. But I hope to come home safe and sound, but if crippled I will bear it bravely, for my country’s sake. The loss of a limb would be but a small price to pay for the salvation of our loved land.*¹⁹

In October 1862, Paul Kuhl wrote to his brother describing the possibility of sacrificing more than just a limb. This letter sums up the young soldier’s commitment to defend his country, even if giving his last full measure of devotion was necessary:

*Although the aspect of affairs is rather gloomy still I feel in first-rate spirits and I tell you honestly that I have no desire to return until this war is settled And if my life is required in the struggled I hope that I am prepared for the sacrifice.*²⁰

In May 1864, whether Paul was prepared or not, he was required to make that sacrifice.



A monument to the men of the 15th New Jersey Volunteers was dedicated on May 12, 1909 near the "Bloody Angle" on the battlefield of Spotsylvania Courthouse

The last letter written by Kuhl, dated May 1, 1864, revealed no signs of fading motives to continue the fight. He wrote in excitement that the Army of the Potomac was finally on the move, and informed his sister to not respond, for there would be no mail communications while the army was advancing. "I suppose you are all getting impatient that Grant does not move and fight . . .," he inquired his sister:

*But you need not wait much longer for news of battle, and long lists of killed, wounded, and missing, and who knows but news of a defeat to gratify the copperheads. But we all hope and pray that victory may crown our efforts, and I think all that is needed to crush the Rebellion is one good whipping, well followed up by a strong force her in Virginia.*²¹

Eleven days later, while making an attack against the Confederate earthworks near the "Bloody Angle" at Spotsylvania Courthouse, Paul Kuhl was wounded in the leg. When the 15th New Jersey fell back to its initial position after being forced out of the hole they had created in the Confederate line, Kuhl was left on the field between the two positions. Improvising a tourniquet out of a handkerchief, he attempted to stop the blood flow from his leg wound until he could receive medical attention. None of Paul's comrades could retrieve his body until the next day, and when they finally reached him—lying close to the rebel works—his body was found pierced again and again by enemy bullets. According to regimental chaplain Alanson Haines, Kuhl had, "given his young heart to his Saviour [*sic*], and was loved and respected, for his manly piety, by all who knew him."²²

Paul had earned the respect he had so long sought for and brought great honor to himself as a man. His patriotism could never be questioned by anyone. The small stone headstone marking his final resting place amongst his comrades in the National Cemetery at Fredericksburg, Virginia, is enough evidence to prove his love of country. His family wept at the news of young Paul's death, but not once did they denounce the cause he so valiantly gave his life for. Five days after hearing of the unfortunate news of his brother's fate, Richard Kuhl wrote home to his mother:

*It is sad for us all. But thousands of mothers, brothers and sisters have suffered this why should we be spared our share of the bitter cup that must be drank before our country is free again?*²³

Sergeant Paul Kuhl's service and sacrifice during the American Civil War are only a footnote in the history of four years that defined a

nation. Dr. James McPherson’s insightful and well supported thesis of why men fought and died coincides with the motives of Paul. It was his duty to his family and country, his want of manhood and respect, and his ardent patriotism that not only caused him to enlist in 1862, but also helped him sustain and fight throughout the entirety of his service. Like any soldier, he missed his family and friends. However, he cherished his ideals and saw himself fighting for a cause greater than he could ever fathom. “I hope another year will end this war and we all return home for good,” he penned in early 1864, “For we have seen enough of service to satisfy me long ago, if it were but mere curiosity that brought me here, but there are principles I take for which I will endure other greater hardships than have yet fell to my lot.”²⁴



Endnotes

1. James McPherson, *For Cause & Comrades: Why Men Fought In The Civil War* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5, 11–12.
2. John D. McLaughlin, ed., “Introduction,” *The Civil War Letters of Paul Kuhl* (Unpublished, 2003). Hereafter cited as *PKL*; Alanson A. Haines, *History of the Fifteenth Regiment New Jersey Volunteers* (Denver, CO: University of Denver, 2009 reprint of 1883 edition), 9, 12.
3. McPherson, *For Cause & Comrades*, 22–23.
4. Paul Kuhl to Martha “Mattie” Kuhl, 2 June 1863, *PKL*.
5. Paul Kuhl to Mattie Kuhl, 27 September 1862, *PKL*.
6. McPherson, *For Cause & Comrades*, 25.
7. Paul Kuhl to Mattie Kuhl, 25 February 1863, *PKL*.
8. Paul Kuhl to Richard “Dick” Kuhl, 27 February 1863, *PKL*.
9. Paul Kuhl to Mattie Kuhl, 23 September 1863, *PKL*.
10. Paul Kuhl to Mattie Kuhl, 26 October 1863, *PKL*.
11. Paul Kuhl to Richard Kuhl, 3 September 1862, *PKL*.
12. McPherson, *For Cause & Comrades*, 91.
13. *Ibid.*, 91–92.
14. Paul Kuhl to Mattie Kuhl, 22 December 1862, *PKL*.
15. Paul Kuhl to Mattie Kuhl, 29 September 1863, *PKL*.
16. Paul Kuhl to Mattie Kuhl, 7 October 1863, *PKL*.
17. Paul Kuhl to Mattie Kuhl, 6 November 1863, *PKL*.
18. Paul Kuhl to Mattie Kuhl, 1 January 1864, *PKL*.
19. Paul Kuhl to Mattie Kuhl, 6 November 1863, *PKL*. Underlining in original.
20. Paul Kuhl to Richard Kuhl, 9 October 1862, *PKL*.
21. Paul Kuhl to Mattie Kuhl, 1 May 1864, *PKL*.
22. Alanson A. Haines, *History of the Fifteenth Regiment New Jersey Volunteers* (Denver, CO: University of Denver, 2009 reprint of 1883 edition), 179.
23. Richard Kuhl to Dorothy Kuhl, 17 May 1864, *PKL*.
24. Paul Kuhl to Mattie Kuhl, 29 January 1864, *PKL*.

Title Page

Image taken from: Carmichael, Peter S. “We Respect a Good Soldier, No Matter What Flag He Fought Under: The 15th New Jersey Remembers Spotsylvania.” *The Spotsylvania Campaign*. Ed. Gary W. Gallagher (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1998), 210.

Fifteenth New Jersey group photo & Monument

Images taken from: “Fifteenth New Jersey Infantry Monument,”

<http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=pv&GRid=13064221&PIpi=2491791>, accessed on 20 May 2013.