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# The Battlefield as a Test of Character

By Ben Summers

After winning the battle of Trenton on Dec. 26, 1776, George Washington ordered his troops to treat captured soldiers "with humanity, and let them have no reason to complain of our copying the brutal example of the British Army in their treatment of our unfortunate brethren who have fallen into their hands."

It wasn't uncommon for British and Hessian soldiers to torture or execute wounded American revolutionaries on the battlefield. Still, Gen. Washington refused to betray his sense of decency and humanity.

Character is often measured in how we react when our values are most tested. In a bleak winter 239 years ago, after crossing the Delaware on Christmas, Washington's order for humanity taught our nation something about character.

Six years ago on a helicopter mission in Afghanistan, a sol-

dier taught me something about character that I'll never forget. It was August 2009, and our company of Blackhawk pilots and crew chiefs was in the midst of a deadly month for coalition forces. As the pace of medevac missions increased and the casualties mounted, our frustrations toward Afghanistan—the land, the war, our enemy—mounted.

One hot August afternoon, we were called on a mission to evacuate wounded Afghan soldiers and civilians. This daytime mission took us into the Kherwar Bowl—a Taliban haven with high altitudes and dust that made any mission dangerous. I was a pilot in our Blackhawk, and a soldier who I knew was having a particularly tough time with his deployment was manning one of our machine guns. We raced to the site with medical staff onboard to assist the wounded.

As we landed, we immediately assessed a grim situation

for the wounded Afghans. The bodies entering our helicopter looked lifeless. Despair filled the cockpit. Were the wounded enemy combatants or supporters of the coalition? What U.S. troops were waiting for our assistance while we evacuated these men? The questions only added to the malaise of frustration and death in the air. That's when the soldier, who didn't fit anyone's typical idea of a hero, came over the intercom system.

"Sir, I'm jumping off the gun," he said. We weren't taking enemy fire, so with my permission he left his machine gun and rushed to the back of the helicopter to aid the wounded. It didn't matter that the patients were Afghans and possibly enemy combatants. To him, there were lives that needed and deserved a helping hand.

Character isn't defined when things are easy. It's etched into how we respond in moments of fear, despair and gloom. The

atrocities of Islamic State terrorists, overseas and on U.S. soil, are testing the values of humanity and openness that set America apart as a nation. Some have even called on U.S. forces to target the "families" of terrorists.

In the face of this loathsome enemy, an enemy that targets civilians, women and children, it's crucial that we heed Washington's words and not act in a way that counters our nation's fundamental principles of decency and humanity.

It's sensible to act with care when welcoming others into our country. It's imperative to confront any force that threatens our way of life and national security. But our greatest strength as a nation is in those principles, if only we uphold them, that can withstand the currents and storms of time.

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