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**VOL. 11, NO. 11** **JUNE 1961**

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# ARMY

A PROFESSIONAL PUBLICATION DEVOTED TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF THE MILITARY ARTS AND SCIENCES AND REPRESENTING THE INTERESTS OF THE ENTIRE U. S. ARMY

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By Tom Hickson



published by the  
**ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY**



# The First *Combat Infantryman*

**COLONEL STEDMAN CHANDLER**

● The enwreathed musket of the Combat Infantryman Badge has become the acknowledged symbol of the Infantry—the Queen of Battles who, in the last analysis, has won every war in history and is not likely to play a minor role in any future conflict, no matter how atomic. It seems reasonable, therefore, to search for a man to match this symbol, who can stand as the prototype of the Queen's Men: America's Combat Infantryman No. 1.

R. W. Thompson, a British author and war correspondent of World War II, has rightly said: "There are bad generals and bad privates. It is no great matter." But it is a great matter if there are bad small-unit troop leaders—leaders of squads, platoons, companies, battalions. War has no place for them; in every winning army you will find they've been weeded out, and that the remnant is a hard core of tough-bodied, tough-minded men remarkably equipped to do what must be done. A good general can train these men and use them properly; a bad general can misuse and sacrifice them; no general can do what they must do: the dangerous, dirty, decisive job of fighting. All armies in all wars have had them, and America, from Plymouth Colony to Korea, can point to an impressive Honor Roll. From such a list it should be hard to pick a prototype, and yet it isn't hard. There is such a man, and among





all the many candidates you will find none more worthy.

Many fine histories of our War for Independence don't even mention him, yet the name of Robert Kirkwood should ring like a strong clear bell for everyone who cherishes the military heritage of the United States. This young Delawarean made a record, documented beyond all doubt, before which we can only stand in awe. The more actual combat one has personally experienced, the more profound his awe.

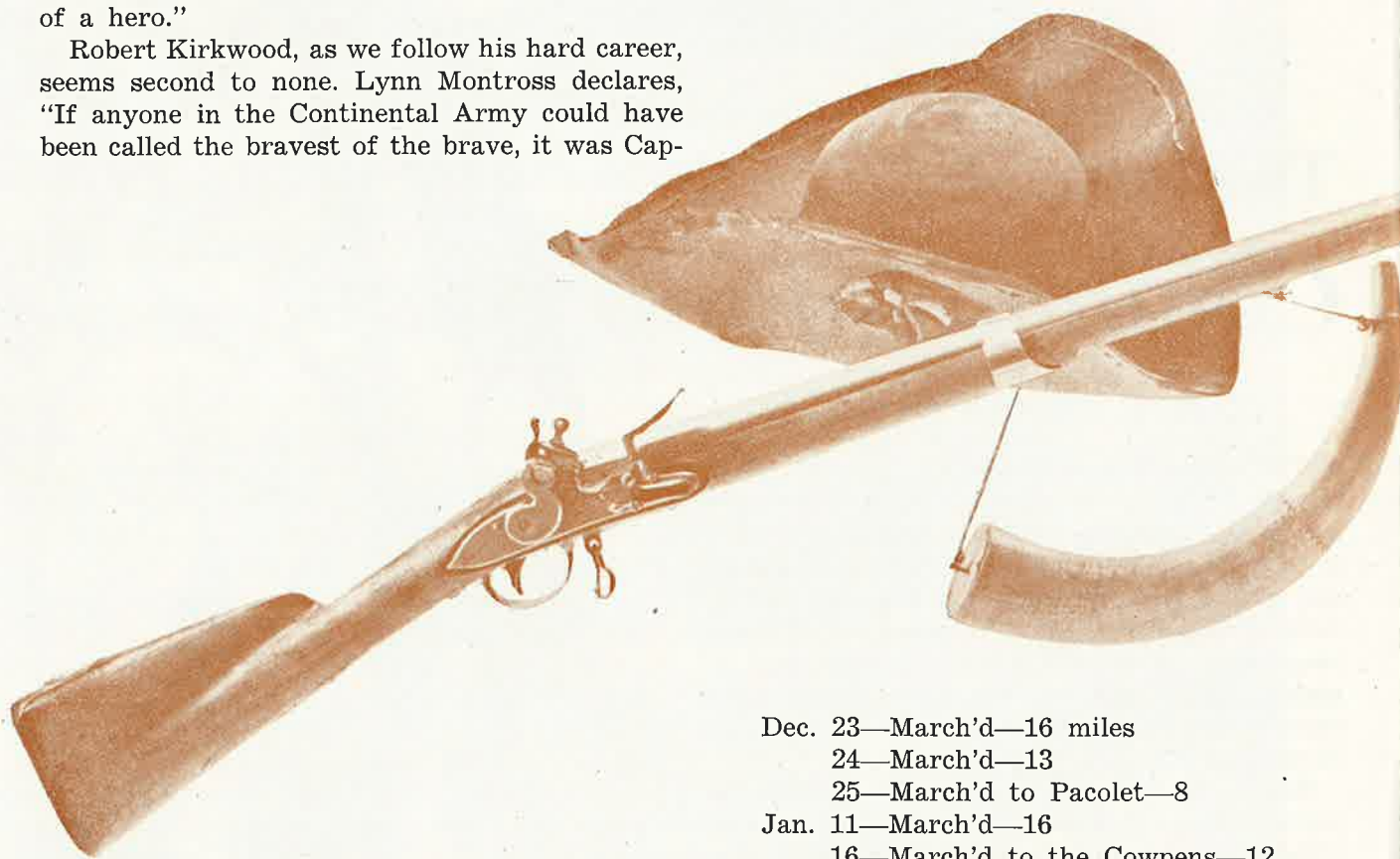
"Greene's Delawares," says the historian Henry Phelps Johnston, "were the admiration of the Army and their leader, Kirkwood, was the American Diomed." Diomed, Thomas Bulfinch tells us, was "second only to Achilles in all the qualities of a hero."

Robert Kirkwood, as we follow his hard career, seems second to none. Lynn Montross declares, "If anyone in the Continental Army could have been called the bravest of the brave, it was Cap-

tain Robert Kirkwood of the Delaware Regiment." Henry Lee referred to "the company of Delaware, under Kirkwood, to whom none could be superior." Nathanael Greene paid repeated tributes to "the brave Kirkwood" and if the unanimous praise of his superiors is not enough, hear the verdict of his own Sergeant Major, William Seymour, written midway in Kirkwood's career: "Captain Robert Kirkwood, whose heroic valour and uncommon and undaunted bravery must needs be recorded in history till after ages."

It is difficult (and extremely annoying to one who would make a three-dimensional, flesh-and-blood character of him) to write of Kirkwood

without dealing in superlatives. Little has come down to us descriptive of his person, his personality, or his personal flaws, which we must assume he had like any human. He led his men and they followed into battle his red shock of hair upon which no hat would remain. His superiors valued his service and lavished praise upon him; his subordinates—and Seymour's evaluation is the only clue—gave him the kind of "followership" of which every leader dreams. He himself was reticent. Though he has the distinction of leaving the most professional diary of the war, his *Journal* is terse and unadorned and his *Order Book* gives only occasional hints as to what might have made him tick. What can you do with a *Journal* that reads like this?



Dec. 23—March'd—16 miles  
24—March'd—13  
25—March'd to Pacolet—8  
Jan. 11—March'd—16  
16—March'd to the Cowpens—12  
17—Defeated Tarlton

"Defeated Tarlton," of course, refers to the almost complete destruction of a small British army, and this same Colonel Banastre Tarleton, who escaped from the Cowpens by the skin of his teeth, was later almost captured by the same Kirkwood, who missed him by an eyelash.

You find Kirkwood at the keypoint of almost every important action in the Revolution. He was in 32 in all; his thirty-third fight came later, and cost him his life. And here we may digress.

It is odd, intriguing and unexplained, but the hard core of the Continentals of both Washington in the north and Greene in the south, from start to finish of the war, was composed of men from Maryland and Delaware. These two small

Robert Kirkwood was born at Mill Creek Hundred near Newark, Delaware, and was educated for the Presbyterian ministry at the Newark Academy, now the University of Delaware. Reports differ: some say he was a farmer, some say a merchant, others that he went straight from the Academy into the service of his country. The last seems most likely, since we know he was commissioned first lieutenant on 17 January 1776, at the age of twenty. He was at Long Island, where the Delawares first distinguished themselves, at Fort Putnam, and at Chatterton's Hill. Before Trenton he was a captain, but since he was busy recruiting he may have missed both Trenton and Princeton, where the gallant Haslet was

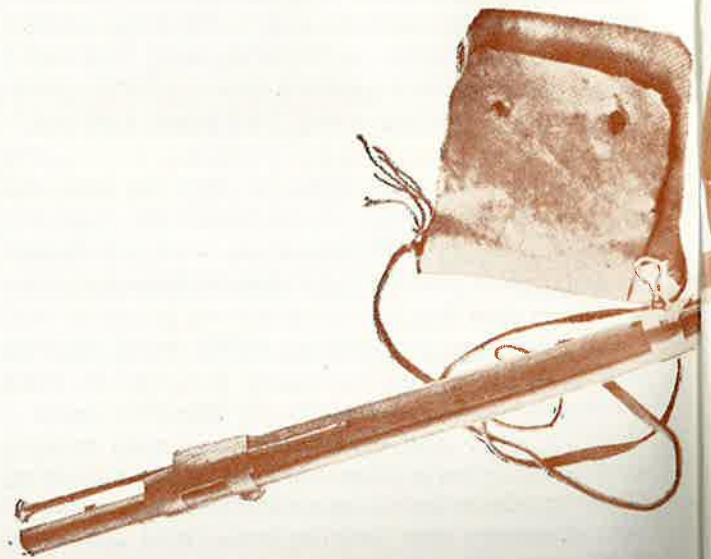
it, Kirkwood held them together. The trail was both long and grisly. Over much of Joseph Vaughan), after Camden, from 500 to 188. been cut from 800 to 124; Hall's (then under thrown in. After Trenton Haslet's regiment had bleeding calluses, and with many a vicious fight part of the time without shoes to protect their (exclusive of the northern campaigns), a good their march, and how they "march'd": 5,006 miles veterans of our mechanized wars should ponder Yes, these Delawares were indestructible, and

desertion was the rule rather than the exception. 1776-77 to 1782-83, and this in a war in which than a hundred Delaware men who lasted from town and then went south, there were well more Including another group which fought at York- continued under Greene, and fought the war out. The remnant, under the senior captain, Kirkwood, almost annihilated in its first fight, at Camden. was sent south to bolster Gates. It was again This outfit fought the battles in the north, then regiment was formed under Colonel David Hall. after Trenton, was disbanded. A new Continental 1777. Haslet's regiment, virtually annihilated A large proportion of the other 87 stemmed from John Haslet's original Delaware regiment in 1776. three—27 per cent—had been members of Colonel These two companies comprised 120 men. Thirty- were 5,006 miles from their 1780 starting point. home. When they arrived, 720 miles later, they the Ashley River in South Carolina and started the two remaining companies left their camp on destruction" merits attention. In December 1782 Delaware military archives, and the term "in-vidual records of the Blue Hen's Chickens in the I have made an exhaustive study of the indi-

would fight all day and dance all night." ceded all soldiers I have ever seen, as they these troops General Greene once said, "They ex- in Tyrone and Antrim, Donegal and Down. Of little Ulstermen, many of whom had been born best families, and a heavy leavening of rugged The Delawares included scions of the state's words thumbnail the redoubtable Delawares.

"They called the Delaware troops "The Blue Hen's Chickens," a name still sometimes applied to citizens of The First State. This was because one of the early companies, Jonathan Caldwell's, took to war for its after-action sport some fighting cocks bred from a certain famous steel-blue hen. For some obscure reason this hen's foster-chickens never had to be blooded in battle as most troops do. They distinguished themselves in their first fight; they were virtually annihilated twice; they ended the war as they began it: disciplined, competent, courageous, incredibly durable. Bruce Lancaster refers to them as "the indestructible Delawares," and again as "Kirkwood's inexhaustible Delawares." John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, once said, "If I could put a regiment through three battles in which its bravery reduced it to a skeleton, the remnant made the most dependable soldiers in the world." These

through nearly seven years of war, at the key-point of every action in which they participated, with a reputation that began and ended without blemish. This record has never been adequately explained and quite possibly has never been equalled either. Johnston said the Delawares were "not excelled by any troops in America, perhaps in the world."



states kept the ranks of their Continentals well allied. From Long Island to Yorktown, the Maryland regiments and the Delaware contingent (first a regiment, later a mere handful) were the units that could always be counted upon, that seldom failed and never badly or without excuse. There were other good units and some great ones: Morgan's, Wayne's, Glover's, Marion's, Lee's legion (leavened by some lusty Delawares), and the tragic twin columns that bearded Canada, but none with the solidly consistent record of these two. Even the immortal 1st Maryland failed once, at Hobkirk's Hill. The Delawares went



killed. Kirkwood was one of the nine Haslet officers who joined Hall's new regiment which, after Princeton, took active part in all the remainder of the northern campaign until 1780, when the Maryland-Delaware Line was sent south.

It is obvious that from the start Kirkwood exhibited high military qualities, though we have scant record of it, he not having opened his *Journal* until the southern march. But after the disaster at Camden where, as John Thomas Scharf notes, "the heroism of the Delaware and Maryland regulars made this grim and deadly fight immortal," the shattered Delawares were in Kirkwood's hands. Lieutenant Colonel Vaughan and Major John Patten were captured, fighting at the tip of De Kalb's spear, and Kirkwood was senior captain, with a bare two companies still answering at muster.

From then on we hear nothing but all-out praise of the "Delaware remnant, under the brave Kirkwood." Read Greene, or Light Horse Harry Lee, or any of the historians who have discovered him—especially the modern writers who have done research in depth—and you will seldom find the name Kirkwood without the adjective "brave." But reading these, I always go back to his Sergeant Major Seymour—a good man in his own right—and his "heroick valour and uncommon and undaunted bravery must needs be recorded in history till after ages." What greater tribute could any troop leader ask?

Seymour wrote this after Camden, when Kirkwood had barely begun to fight. After Camden Gates formed the two Delaware companies into light infantry—literally "foot cavalry"—and joined them with the dragoons of William Washington, already established as a rugged combat leader. Fat and genial, but strong and hard-fibered, Washington found Kirkwood an ideal cohort. When Nathanael Greene took the command from Gates at Charlotte in December 1780, he found a compatible and effective pair to use as he saw fit. He used them until he wore them out, but by then the war was won.

For a pleasant change Kirkwood's next battle was a victory, that model set-piece devised by the fertile brain of Daniel Morgan at the Cowpens. This is the fight noted in Kirkwood's *Journal* as "Defeated Tarleton." Tarleton was destroyed, thanks to Morgan's peculiar genius. Even so, according to Scharf, the day would have been lost had the veteran Maryland and Delaware regulars wavered at the decisive moment. Instead, as Seymour reports, "Tarleton endeavoured to outflank us on the right to prevent which Capt. Kirkwood wheeled his company to the right and attacked their left flank so vigorously that they were soon repulsed." Scharf adds that never before was there known such quick loading, discharge and

reloading of flintlock muskets and rifles as the Delaware and Maryland men then displayed; the rapidity and accuracy of their fire demoralized the British.

We must note that these men of Maryland and Delaware not only repeatedly held their ground against any and all odds but were always ready and able to counterattack. They were vicious with the bayonet, a rarity with Americans in any war, and they fired their weapons accurately and often. This can have been due only to training and leadership. In the Revolution (as General S. L. A. Marshall found in World War II), report after report bemoans the failure of men to fire. It is firepower that wins battles, and Greene's firepower consistently came from the weapons of his Maryland-Delaware Line. Most other units appear to have been quite listless about it.

After Cowpens Greene made his masterful retreat to the Dan River, leaving to protect him General John Eager Howard of Maryland with "the flower of the army" (including Kirkwood). It was, according to Seymour, a chase in which both armies suffered incredible privations. "Most of the men," he wrote, "were entirely without shoes and had no time to cook what provisions they had."

As they retreated, Lee's Legion (with Kirkwood along) continuously harried their pursuers and more than once almost captured the elusive Tarleton. Lee's cavalry almost got him once and Kirkwood's foot came even closer. Seymour tells us that on the night of 6 March 1781, "there commenced a smart skirmish in which great numbers of Tories were sent to the lower regions. We marched for camp which we reached about daybreak, having marched all night through deep swamps, morasses and thickets—26 miles." Tarleton escaped again, but it was a near thing; the fox had almost caught the hound.

As the chase went on, Greene wrote: "For more than two months more than one-third of our men were entirely naked, with nothing but a breech cloth about them . . . and the rest were ragged as wolves. Our beef were perfect carrion, and even bad as it was, we were often without any."

Then on 15 March, having received reinforcements, Greene decided on battle again, and risked one at Guilford Court House. Employing Morgan's Cowpens tactics, he placed the North Carolina militia in the front line, to fire and fall back, Kirkwood was on the right flank, with Washington's dragoons and Lynch's Virginia riflemen. When the British attacked (in mass formation, according to a custom they could not unlearn) the Carolinians broke, most of them without firing at all. The second militia line behaved better but eventually they and the Virginians re-

door when forced to give way by superior fire; they escaped only by grabbing prisoners and using them as shields. Stubbornly as always, they moved back through the British camp, where they found themselves alone, the army having fled. But Kirkwood's words tell how far from liked they were: "Round our army had withdrawn from the field, made it necessary for us Likewise to withdraw. We brought off one of the Enemy's three Pounders, which with much difficulty was performed through a thick wood for near four miles without the assistance of but one Horse."

Again, according to habit, the Kirkwoods were the last men out, disciplined and in good order, dragging a trophy with them.

Greene viewed Eutaw as a victory, which in every important respect it was, and he was generous in his official report to the President of the Congress. "I think myself principally indebted for the victory obtained to the free use of the bayonet made by the Virginians and Marylanders, the infantry of the Legion, and Captain Kirkwood's light infantry, and though few armies ever exhibited equal bravery with ours in general, yet the conduct and intrepidity of these corps were peculiarly conspicuous." For a most signal victory the Congress then thanked Greene, and the Maryland and Virginia brigades and the Delaware battalion for the "unparalleled bravery and heroism by them displayed in advancing to the enemy through an incessant fire and charging them with an impetuosity and ardor that could not be resisted."

Kirkwood was sent to the Congaree River, where he took the ague and fever, and spent a month recuperating at Daniel Huger's plantation. Then he and his officers were relieved from duty after more than six years of continuous service, and they "march'd" home. By the time all were there (the troops coming much later) they had those 5,006 walking miles behind them, and a long list of viciously fought battles, without a black mark anywhere.

In evaluating this record there are several points to remember. First, the Southern Army, under Gates and Greene, was a motley and fluid force. It was bloated one day by an influx of local militia who sometimes fought well and often badly, and who always melted away promptly after every fight, to return later or be supplanted by others ever rarer. This logically would confuse it not disorganize any small core of regulars who never knew where they stood, but through-out the long campaign the Maryland-Delaware Line remained steadfast, almost without exception.

Secondly, these regulars were fighting in an alien climate and a harsh one; their hardships,

tired, passing the weight of numbers to the enemy. Then the brand-new 2d Maryland broke and the brunt of decision fell upon Greene's veterans: "The 1st Maryland, the company of Delaware, under Kirkwood, to whom none could be superior, and the Legion infantry." The Marylanders, with Kirkwood, counterattacked with "furious courage," beating back several times their number.

Though Greene failed to hold the field, he gained the victory; the damage done to the best troops of Cornwallis was, as it proved, irreparable. Even the haughty Tarleton acknowledged Guilford as "the pledge of ultimate defeat."

Kirkwood still had work ahead of him, including an independent foray against Logtown which resulted in a brisk fight. Shortly after, at Hobkirk's Hill, American confusion and mistaken orders resulted in a setback, but by now it was apparent that the Delawares were winning nothing but praise. "They maintained," Schart says, "their untarnished reputation." Greene's orders of the day for the 26th commended the "gallant behavior of the light infantry, commanded by Captain Kirkwood." Seymour recorded in his diary that "in this action the light infantry under Captain Kirkwood were returned many thanks by General Greene for their gallant behavior."

At the abortive siege of Ninety Six, Kirkwood's light troops were with the infantry of Lee's Legion, under the redoubtable Mike Rudolph (Kirkwood's closest rival for the title of Combat Infantryman No. 1), and they behaved with their customary valor. They were, in fact, the only troops to get into the fort itself. There they stayed until Greene, upon the approach of Lord Rawdon, deciding to raise the siege, ordered them out. From Long Island on, these Delawares exhibited a strong aversion to retreat, and never did unless ordered to or driven by overpowering force. When they did, they fell back sullenly and in good order.

So finally they came to the end of their battle road at Eutaw Springs, on 8 September 1781. This was a peculiar battle which the Americans should have won hands down and almost did. Strategically it remained a victory but tactically it was, as Montross aptly says, a trifle tarnished. This was due to the unhappy fact that when the Americans overran the British camp, even the usually reliable Marylanders yielded to the lure of a lush supply of British grog. Whole companies got drunk; the enemy counterattacked, drove them out, and captured their artillery.

Meanwhile, Kirkwood, who had been fighting a rear-guard action all day, was trying to push the British out of a strong stone house, turned into a fort as the Chew House had been at German-town. Kirkwood's unstopables were at the very

even had they been properly equipped to meet them, would have been exceptional. But they were not so equipped; they fought shoeless and in rags and subsisted on molasses, frogs and alligators. Also, they got no pay.

Finally, they fought in a region seared by one of history's most savage civil wars, with both sides—Tories and Whigs—admittedly guilty of inexcusable excesses. It was an atmosphere both dangerous and degrading, yet at no time do we find the Continental Line befouled by it. They fought their own war, grimly by themselves, taking no part in the local butcheries and often preventing them.

Considering all we know about the individual soldier of the Revolution, his independence, leveling attitude, and scorn of authority, the record of this Continental Line must reflect only the most commendable and superior leadership.

Since here the Delawares are our chief concern, the superlative record of the small band he commanded must be charged to the exceptional military qualities of Robert Kirkwood, the veteran captain who even at the war's end was still in his middle twenties.

Captain he remained. Hear Light Horse Harry Lee: "Captain Kirkwood passed through the war with high reputation; and yet, as the line of Delaware consisted of but one regiment and that regiment was reduced to a captain's command, Kirkwood could never be promoted in regular routine. . . . The sequel is singularly hard. Kirkwood retired upon peace, a captain (he had been brevetted major) and when the army under St. Clair was raised to defend the West from the Indian enemy, this veteran resumed his sword as the eldest captain in the oldest regiment. In the decisive defeat on the 4th of November, 1791, at the battle of Miami, the gallant Kirkwood fell, bravely sustaining his point in the action. It was the thirty-third time he had risked his life for his country, and he died as he had lived, the brave, meritorious, unrewarded Kirkwood."

The sequel was indeed hard. Returning to Delaware, his state granted him an award of 100 pounds, but only Virginia really rewarded his services. From the Old Dominion he received a grant of 2,000 acres of land in North West Territory, in what is now southeastern Ohio. His land was probably in Belmont County, across from Wheeling, where he removed soon after the grant was made. In 1790 he was a justice of the peace, and a carefully written copy of the laws promulgated by General St. Clair is found in the back of his *Journal*, together with some interesting items from his docket. On 4 March 1791 he was commissioned captain in the 2d Infantry, and "march'd" again, under St. Clair in his hapless expedition against the Indians. St. Clair was ambushed and

his troops, largely militia and as poor in quality as any ever assembled, were scattered and slaughtered. Only small groups of Regulars stood and fought. One of these was led by Kirkwood, who refused to give ground and died with his face to the enemy at Fort Recovery, Ohio. "There, resting beneath a tree, lay old Kirkwood, scalped, his head smoking like a chimney." A more honorable son the United States has never had, nor a braver one.

Since Robert Kirkwood survived the Revolution there is no certainty, even under today's more liberal system of awards, that he would have been awarded the Medal of Honor, though the Continental Congress actually did grant medals to Morgan, Howard, and William Washington for the Cowpens, where Kirkwood was almost equally distinguished. But it is hardly arguable that by today's standards, the rugged Delawarean would have worn a Distinguished Service Cross with more Oak Leaf Clusters than any one ribbon could fairly carry. It would be interesting to know of any company officer in the Army who ever received more citations and glowing tributes than Kirkwood. But he was never awarded a medal or any current counterpart, and his brevet came very late: as major on 30 September 1783.

Without the Kirkwoods of that war, and of all the wars that followed, there could have been no United States of America. One real disaster for Greene, and the Revolution would have collapsed. To be sure, Kirkwood didn't win it single-handed; nevertheless, he and his men were ever at a critical spot, and over the whole long route there is no hint of their having failed; only of staunch and vital service. As Colonel John W. Thomason said of Marbot, Kirkwood loved his country and the Army and all his record is honorable.

*There are bad generals and bad privates. It is no great matter.* But for the key men, the "cornerstone men" as R. W. Thompson calls them, the men who win or save battles, there are no substitutes. Modern research in depth applied to the battlefield has proved what all combat veterans already know: that every battle is won by such men, singly or in small groups, fighting on their own initiative at the right time in the right place; and that such men are rare. The same type of research reveals that few men—and only truly exceptional men—ever sustain, over long periods, their peaks of either capacity or daring. In this light the simple chronicle of Robert Kirkwood seems to define the man, and the shadow he casts is a long one. It is therefore no more than just that now, nearly two centuries later, we salute him for what he was: America's Diomed, America's Combat Infantryman No. 1. This is his overdue reward, and one he would have liked. And so would the Blue Hen's Chickens.