

The Ultimate Sacrifice: How Two Americans Gave Their Lives for Estonia



An American Red Cross field hospital being set up in Narva in 1920. *(Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress)*

U.S. Army Lieutenants Clifford A. Blanton and George W. Winfield lost their lives fighting for Estonia in March 1920. As both men were American Red Cross officers commissioned by the U.S. Secretary of War to provide ambulance and field hospital services, neither carried any weapons. But then again neither did their enemy: typhus. When an escalating typhus epidemic threatened to spread across Estonia from the defeated White Russian Army soldiers interned at Narva, Lt. Blanton and Lt. Winfield volunteered for the dangerous mission of setting up a sanitary cordon around this front-line city. Both men knew the risks they would face. And just as they accomplished their mission, both paid the ultimate price. Grateful for their work in preventing the spread of an epidemic which claimed the lives of some three million people in neighboring Russia and thousands more in Estonia, the Estonian Government awarded both men with posthumous medals: the Cross of Liberty 1st Class in 1920 and then again with the Order of the Estonian Red Cross 3rd Class in 1923.

Second Lieutenant Clifford A. Blanton was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee on June 9, 1892. Although he was 27 years old, he looked much younger. His commanding officer, Captain Loy W. Henderson, described him thus: "Blanton was not more than twenty, was full of animal energy, liked to play jokes, and seemed to derive real joy from his work; and yet he, too, was

homesick and was among the first to line up for the mail when the pouch would come in from Tallinn.” When Capt. Henderson and his three field officers came down with the very spotted typhus they were fighting, Lt. Blanton was the first to die on March 26, 1920. Not aware that the end was near, Lt. Blanton exchanged a few final words with his captain before lapsing into a coma and then dying.

First Lieutenant George W. Winfield was born in Esopus, New York on October 13, 1872. Captain Henderson wrote: “Winfield, who was in his early forties, seemed to suffer throes of conscience at having been away from his wife and home so long.” A family man, Lt. Winfield and his wife Elizabeth had three children: Yvette, Bertram, and Catherine. After serving as an engineer with the U.S. Army in the late 1880s, Winfield became a businessman in the town of Highland Falls, New York where he was elected justice of the peace. He joined the American Red Cross after the start of the Great War and left for France on March 15, 1918. But he would never make it back home: Lt. Winfield died in Narva two days after Lt. Blanton on March 28, 1920. According to Capt. Henderson, “He may have known that death was near for he asked me, in case he should not survive, to convey his love to his wife.”

Lt. Winfield and Lt. Blanton were both buried in Estonia with full honors at Tallinn's Military Cemetery on April 7, 1920. Estonian officials attending the burial included Estonia's Foreign Minister Aadu Birk, Interior Minister Alexander Hellat, General Ernst Põdder, as well as other officers representing both the Estonian Army and the Estonian Red Cross. Many American Red Cross (ARC) officers – some from as far away as Paris – were at the funeral. British military officers, diplomats, and Red Cross officials as well as the French military attaché paid homage to the fallen men.

While a naval band played funeral music, those in attendance laid wreaths at the two grave sites. Last rites were read in both English and Estonian. The following day, *Tallinna Teataja* reported: “The humanitarian work done by the American Red Cross in our homeland is already so well known that there is no need to discuss it at length any more. Now two Americans have lost that which they held most precious – their lives – in the battle to help us. Forever we will retain the memory of these men who lived among us – be gentle with them, free Estonian soil.”

A Forgotten Story

Back in 1920, the American Red Cross Commission for Western Russia and the Baltic States was a major operation, employing 503 Americans and 2,164 local staff members. During its first year of operation, the Commission spent \$14 million (worth at least \$137 million today) on relief work in the region, providing everything from ambulances to safety pins. Their toughest job was here in Estonia. As the *New York Times* wrote on October 31, 1920, “One of the most difficult tasks of the organization, according to the [ARC] report, was in helping the people of Esthonia, where there was no ambulance service and very little in the way of hospitals when the Americans arrived. The [White Russian] army was in retreat and disorganized, and the combined force of soldiers and civilians [mainly Russian refugees] to the number of 20,000 was described as a hungry, suffering, panic-stricken mob. In December [1919] typhus broke out, and

for months the Red Cross workers fought the disease amid great difficulties.”

The *New York Times* description got even more graphic: “At one time the dead were piled in the corners of the rooms with the sick, and no effort at decent burial was made. In a hospital in Reval, consisting of a single barrack with 460 beds in one room, there were 600 deaths in one week. Thousands of cases were treated, and with only the untrained assistance of the people the epidemic finally was conquered but not until two American Red Cross officers, Lieutenant George W. Winfield and Lieutenant Clifford A. Blanton, had succumbed to the disease.”

The article concluded with a note that: “In the Baltic States, in addition to ordinary relief efforts, the Red Cross Commissions aided in the treatment of nearly 20,000 typhus cases and disinfecting stations and hospitals had to be established on a large scale.” At least sixty Americans earned the Order of the Estonian Red Cross for the help they provided Estonia while at least twenty ARC field officers received the added honor of the Cross of Liberty for their services.

Forgotten Risks

Lt. Ernest Hemingway was probably the most famous of all ARC ambulance drivers. In his novel *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), Hemingway romanticized the time he spent on the Italian Front during the Great War. But the work of an ARC ambulance driver was much more dangerous than glamorous – especially on the fluid Baltic Front. In both Latvia and Estonia, the American Red Cross provided the very first ambulance services these countries had ever seen. Given the constantly shifting battle lines and the large numbers of Russian, German, Latvian, and Estonian soldiers involved in fighting on various sides, ARC ambulance drivers like Lt. Blanton, Lt. Winfield, and their colleagues put their lives at risk every time they got behind the wheel.

Driving around wearing their alien U.S. Army uniforms, other soldiers were sometimes not quite sure whose side they were on. But the answer was quite simple: the ARC ambulance drivers were on the side of the wounded, regardless of their nationality or their political cause. ARC ambulance drivers – and their colleagues who ran field hospitals behind the front lines – even followed General Nikolai Yudenich and his White Russian troops all the way to the outskirts of Petrograd in November 1919.

The War of Independence finally ended in February 1920. But not all of Estonia's enemies could read the peace Treaty of Tartu. The typhus epidemic raged on, continuing its relentless attack on both Tallinn and Narva. In response, the Estonian Government declared martial law and turned over control of all sanitary measures to the American Red Cross. While some ARC field officers battled against typhus in Tallinn, Lt. Winfield and Lt. Blanton joined their new commanding officer, Capt. Loy W. Henderson, on the front line in Narva. Rounding off the group was Capt. Wilbur F. Howell. According to Capt. Henderson, “Howell, who was in his late twenties, was quiet and hardworking. He carefully analyzed the problems confronting us and made many helpful suggestions.”

A Forgotten Battle

The final battle against typhus in Narva lasted for almost a month from late February to late March 1920. Under the command of Capt. Henderson, his American, Estonian, and Russian allies worked together to plan their attack. The key to victory would be to overwhelm their enemy – the tiny lice which spread the deadly disease from human to human. As Capt. Henderson described his colleagues in his memoirs *A Question of Trust* (1986): “These three men, like myself, were field officers – not medical men. They worked almost day and night preparing for the coming campaign. They never spared themselves and did not allow the depressing scenes, which they were constantly encountering, to lower their morale.”

The ARC recruited Estonian, Russian, and American doctors, nurses, and hospital attendants from everywhere they could and sent them to Narva. The ARC office in Tallinn provided their colleagues with the necessary medicine, supplies, and equipment. In order “to protect the workers and to minimize the further spread of the disease, team members were required to wear long rubber coats with rubber hoods, which the [American] Red Cross had been able to procure.” The extensive preparations achieved an early and important victory – it convinced everyone that the battle against typhus could be won. Captain Henderson reported: “It was particularly heartening to see the change in the attitude of the Russian [White Army] doctors. Some of them who had abandoned all hope of being able to accomplish anything awoke from their apathy, joined us, and became enthusiastic workers.’

Soon, everything was ready. And so, four tri-national units under the coordinated commands of Capt. Henderson, Capt. Howell, Lt. Blanton, and Lt. Winfield launched their attack. In Capt. Henderson's words: “In the second week of March [1920] we inaugurated the campaign and within a few days it was in full swing. Each day hundreds of clean beds were being filled by bathed, shaven patients. No patient, however sick, could be moved into the clean rooms until he had been completely deloused; otherwise a new infection might develop. The delousing was a rather trying process. Some could not endure it and died in the trucks or in the baths. Within twenty days after the campaign had been inaugurated, the backbone of the epidemic was broken. Practically all of the sick were in clean beds in disinfected rooms. The American and other doctors were examining and diagnosing their illnesses. Those with infectious diseases were segregated. Even the badly needed medicines that had been in short supply were on the way to Estonia.” Thanks to the coordinated efforts of Americans, Estonians, and Russians, Estonia would soon achieve victory in her war against typhus.

But perhaps the ARC's greatest accomplishment was to give everyone hope – even the defeated and demoralized troops of the White Russian Army. As Capt. Henderson explained: “The morale of the Russians, sick and well alike, and of the whole Estonian community had been raised. The interned Russians who had not been hospitalized began to awaken from their fatalistic lethargy. Under the guidance of Russian doctors and medical corpsmen, and with the encouragement and assistance of the Estonians, they organized their own groups to clean the internment camps and to engage in massive delousing. The Estonian Sanitary Corps, supplemented by the Estonian Red Cross, mobilized thousands of volunteers who worked

tirelessly in combating the spread of the plague-spreading insects in schools, churches, and private homes. Also, a number of sanitary stations were set up on the Russian border to inspect and delouse the refugees coming in from Russia.”

The Forgotten Sacrifice

After a month on the front line, all four ARC field officers came down with the very typhus they were fighting. Before the first vaccine was developed in 1930, typhus killed between ten and sixty per cent of those it infected. Unfortunately, the ARC officers in Narva fell near the high end of the fatality spectrum. While Capt. Henderson and Capt. Howell would survive their bouts with the disease, Lt. Blanton and Lt. Winfield would not – they gave their lives so that others might live. Back in spring 1920, Estonian papers were filled with appreciations of Lt. Winfield and Lt. Blanton and their ultimate sacrifice. On April 3, 1920 an article on the front page of *Päevaleht* ended with the words: “Estonia cries out to you who had to leave your lives behind here – rest in peace in your final slumber.”

Estonia was encouraged to forget the work of the American Red Cross during the fifty long years of back-to-back Soviet, Nazi, and Soviet occupations. Although they saved thousands of Estonian and Russian lives, Lt. Blanton and Lt. Winfield's sacrifice has been all but forgotten. As the bodies of both U.S. Army officers were returned to their homes in the United States, even their burial markers are gone from Tallinn's Military Cemetery. Lt. Blanton was reburied at Forest Hills Cemetery in Chattanooga, Tennessee on September 27, 1920. Soldiers from the U.S. Sixth Cavalry fired a salute in his honor. Back home, Lt. Blanton's name was added to Hamilton County's memorial to their sons who died fighting in the Great War together with 124 other U.S. Army dead and ten each from the U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps. Lt. Winfield's body was also returned for a quiet reburial in the United States at the request of his widow.





Lt. Blanton and Lt. Winfield's funeral at Tallinn Military Cemetery on April 7, 1920. (Photos: *Tallinn Photo Museum*)