Gettysburg Stories

Third Day of Battle

BY

BRIAN WALRATH

Stories Chapter 6 – 3rd Day part 1

THE GREAT CANNONADE

As dawn broke on the morning of July 3, the Union soldiers on Cemetery Ridge were greeted with a shocking sight: During the night, the Confederates had moved scores of cannons into position east of Seminary Ridge – and they were pointed at the center of the Union line. Throughout the morning, they could see more guns being moved up. Ultimately, guns stretched for over a mile from the Peach Orchard to the Chambersburg Pike. There was speculation about what this meant. Some felt these guns were there to cover a Confederate withdrawal, others were sure that it portended another Rebel attack.

Over on the Union right, the vicious fight for Culp's Hill, which had started late in the evening then died down only to be resumed in the morning, finally abated for good about eleven a.m. On the northern part of Cemetery Ridge the skirmishing over the Bliss farm, which sat half way between the two armies' lines, ended when the Federals burned the buildings. Then a strange calm settled over the battlefield. Union General Carl Schurz described it as a "perfect stillness" and "a tranquility like the peaceful and languid repose of a warm midsummer morning." But the general felt "there was something ominous, something uncanny, in these strange, unexpected hours of profound silence."

Near the Copse of Trees on Cemetery Ridge the ration wagons arrived bringing lunch to the artillery batteries. Just north of the Copse sat Battery A of the 4th United States Artillery, a regular army unit commanded by boyish-looking 22-year-old Alonzo Cushing, who had graduated from West Point in 1861, a year or so ahead of schedule, to feed the war's appetite for junior officers. A few hungry infantrymen approached the artillerists, who always seemed to eat well, hoping to scrounge some food.

LT Alonzo Cushing

Lunch was also on the mind of General John Gibbon, commander of the division that was posted at the Copse. He asked Generals Meade and Hancock to join him for a stew of potatoes and what Gibbon described as an "old and tough

rooster". Old it may have been, but it must have tasted good to men who had eaten little in the last few days. Afterwards, the generals lit up cigars, which the Union officer corps seemed to live on. Many men dozed in the warmth of the midday sun. There was not much to do but await Lee's next move.

At 1:07 p.m., according to Mathematics Professor Michael Jacobs of Pennsylvania College in Gettysburg, two Confederate cannon sounded near the Peach Orchard. It was the signal for the start of the greatest cannonade ever conducted in the Western Hemisphere, the one that preceded Pickett's Charge. Over 100 Rebel cannon shelled the Union lines, and were answered by 80 or so Yankee guns. It went on for over an hour and consumed in excess of ten thousand artillery shells. The smoke and dust raised by the barrage was visible for miles around in Pennsylvania and Maryland. It was said the sound could be heard 150 miles away in Pittsburgh, but was barely audible at Chambersburg, just 25 miles west of Gettysburg. Such acoustical aberrations were mentioned in accounts of other Civil War battles.

Unfortunately for the Confederates, many of their artillery rounds went high and did not have the desired effect on the Union batteries and soldiers on Cemetery Ridge. Several reasons have been offered for this, including the smoke that soon obscured the battlefield, poor quality fuses which burned too long or failed to ignite the shells' explosive charge, or elevation changes as a result of the gun carriages slowly digging deeper and deeper into the ground with each shot. Many of their projectiles passed over Cemetery Ridge and landed in the rear among reserve troops, hospitals and wagon trains; they also chased General Meade away from his headquarters on the back slope of the ridge.

Meade's headquarters showing damage from Confederate cannons, with horse grave in front.

Nevertheless, the cannonade did some damage to the Union troops who had to stay in position along the ridge and to the artillery batteries aligned there. In those days artillery was employed almost exclusively in a direct fire mode; that is, the

gunners had to see their targets and aim their cannon using sights on the barrel, much like an infantryman aiming a rifle. The enemy, of course, could see the guns and gunners in return, making them obvious targets. To work the guns, the crews had to stand upright in the open, unlike the infantry, who could seek cover behind stone walls and other protection. So several Union guns were put out of commission, ammunition caissons were blown up, and artillerists killed or wounded. Especially hard hit was Cushing's battery at the Copse of Trees.

Cushing's guns returned fire despite having been reduced to just two cannon and losing many gunners to Confederate fire. Infantrymen were pressed into service to replace lost artillerists. A shell fragment tore into Cushing's shoulder, then another shard opened up his abdomen. He was ordered to the rear, but, holding in his intestines, he insisted on remaining with his guns. "I stay right here and fight it out," said Cushing, "or die in the attempt." Too weak for his orders to be heard, he was held up by Frederick Fuger, his first sergeant, who repeated the young lieutenant's commands. For his bravery, Fuger was later awarded the Medal of Honor. Cushing was also – belatedly – awarded the Medal of Honor in 2014.

Badly wounded Alonzo Cushing leans on his cannon in this except from the Cyclorama.

After the war, many veterans tried to describe the terror of the cannonade, but most admitted that the words escaped them. General Gibbon described the scene near the Copse of Trees as "the most infernal pandemonium it has ever been my fortune to look upon." He added "the whole air above and around us was filled with bursting and screaming projectiles, and the continuous thundering of the guns…" Gibbon, in the tradition that officers must show courage in combat, walked the length of his division's line with one of his staff officers, Lieutenant Frank Haskell, chatting with his men all the way. Noting that most of the Confederate shells were going high, they decided that they could boost morale even more – and be safer – if they went forward of the lines. So they crossed over the stone wall and walked about 75 yards down the slope, then sat down in the shade of some trees. For them, the closer they got to the enemy, the safer they were. They also

had a better view of the enemy lines, since they could see under the cloud of smoke and dust.

II Corps commander General Winfield Scott Hancock, who commanded most of the men who would bear the brunt of Pickett's Charge, had his own way of cheering his men. He rode slowly along the line seemingly oblivious to the shells screaming around him. When begged to dismount and take cover, he replied "There are times when a corps commander's life does not count." It is not recorded whether the guidon bearer following him shared this sentiment.

General Winfield Scott Hancock

Hancock also argued with General Henry Hunt, chief of artillery for the Army of the Potomac, over artillery tactics during the cannonade. Hancock wanted the union guns to vigorously return fire since it bolstered the morale of the Northern troops. Hunt, a crafty artillerist, insisted that the Union cannon fire should slacken, both to conserve ammunition for the infantry assault he was sure was coming and to deceive the Rebs into thinking that the Union guns had been silenced, either by damage from the Rebel fire or lack of ammunition. Hunt won the argument (Hancock was in no position to overrule him). When the Union cannon fire started to slacken, the word was given for the Rebel infantry to start their assault. On Cemetery Ridge, the Federal soldiers watched in awe as 13,000 Confederates emerged from the woods on Seminary Ridge and started their long, deliberate advance. The word rippled up and down the Union line, "Here they come!" "Here comes the infantry."