“…with unabated fury.”

A Vision of Civil War Battles: Antietam and Gettysburg

Tom Decker
Introductory Remarks

I perceive the expression and communication of the human experience to be essential to that very experience and existence. It is hardly any surprise that this concept, which has fostered an interest in history and storytelling throughout my life, forms the core of this present work. Nor should my fundamental subject, the American Civil War be unexpected. Despite my long affiliation with the Civil War (the term “buff” has been thrown around by some), the nature of my interest has in recent years deviated. Although still centered on the profusion of horrific battles, each with its own significance and grim results, I find myself, with this embodying work as evidence, fascinated with the personal accounts of those men who lived and died as part of it. As acclaimed documentarian Ken Burns has realized and conveyed through his films, it is in the words of these people, retained and remembered, where the experience of the past is most alive, real, and personal.

My attempt to convey the Civil War experience is truly a synthesis: a fusion of interests, media, methods, and even time. It has been my intention since my earliest annunciations and proposals to focus on a historical event, a moment both personal and communal. And within this, I have placed an emphasis on the essential elements of person and place in order to reveal a captivating story. Such ambitions have yielded the following form: photographs from across two pivotal battlefields paired with captions derived from the writings of soldiers who witnessed the horror and drama at these very locations over 140 years ago. Each portion stark and detached, with the other as the only accompaniment.

A two-year creative process, coursing the breadth of my involvement in the Honors Humanities program at the University of Maryland - College Park, seems to have at last formulated a satisfying result, the following.
A Brief Note on the Battles

By the night of September 16, 1862, Confederate General Robert E. Lee had assembled most of his formerly scattered Army of Northern Virginia in defensive positions along the ridges west of Sharpsburg, Maryland. The Army of the Potomac, under the command of General George B. McClellan, approached from the east with superior numbers and settled around Antietam Creek. The very next day, McClellan attempted to drive the Confederate forces back across the Potomac River through piecemeal assaults along his front, from north to south, rather than a combined attack to utilize his statistical advantage and destroy Lee’s army on the field. The hectic flow of combat has often been segmented into three phases, coursing from the Morning phase amongst cornfields and woods, to the Midday attack by Union troops at a sunken road, and concluding with an Afternoon assault which reached the town’s outskirts but was beaten back by recently arrived Confederate infantry. Although the battle consumed only a single day, the resulting 23,000 casualties made it the costliest to American life of the entire Civil War, and even all subsequent wars.

Months later, in the heart of the war’s third summer, these armies again met in the fields and woods near a small town yet to be touched by the roiling national conflict. More of a chance engagement, it began as converging Confederate corps encountered a detachment of Union cavalry (with infantry soon to arrive and escalate the situation) to the west and north of a southern Pennsylvania town, Gettysburg. At the close of July 1, the Union forces would be creating defensive positions after being forced through and beyond the town by the Confederate contingent. With both armies gathering strength, and the Army of the Potomac’s recently appointed commander, General George G. Meade, arrived on the field, Lee struck at the forces before him on July 2. Both of the Union flanks,
anchored on rocky hills, were attacked late in the day, and each nearly gave way. Although fighting resumed on the northern end of the field early in the morning, Lee’s main assault did not commence until mid-afternoon. Following a lengthy artillery duel, three Confederate divisions, almost 13,000 troops, assaulted the Union center on Cemetery Ridge. The maneuver has joined the annals of history as “Pickett’s Charge,” and its outcome is well-known. The combined casualties of the three-day engagement totaled over 45,000 men, the most destructive in American history. The anniversary of America’s independence passed a day later, but the solidity of the Confederacy’s sovereignty would still take two more years to determine.
“It was in the grey of early morning when the Sergeant Major, walking rapidly along the line of sleeping men, awakened us with a gruff voice to roll call. I arose from my greensward bed with a feeling of numbness in my left side, caused by the pressure of my cartridge box against it all night, for we had slept accoutred for the battle which we were certain would occur with the daylight. Even as the roll was being called the musket fire of the picket lines commenced quite briskly, and mounted orderlies came galloping along the lines seeking the regimental commanders for whom they had orders. Behind us we could hear the continuous whinney of artillery horses and the braying of mules hauling the ammunition wagons, all expecting their morning feed, which a very few received. Looking along the line I saw the men wiping the moisture from their muskets, for the dew had been heavy, and just now there was considerable fog. Others were changing their gun caps or adjusting a knapsack, putting canteen and haversack well behind, to give free access to the cartridge box. Others were munching hardtack, and some were smoking. Several of my comrades, with canteens, had gone for water, with the evident intention of making coffee, while others had made little fires for cooking breakfast, taking rails from an adjacent fence for the purpose; when suddenly and sternly came the orders to get back into the ranks.

...The premonitions of battle were growing stronger, and the expected battle had been apparent for more than 24 hours, and we knew that the culmination of another great tragedy was at hand. How pallied were the faces of all, with unkempt hair, thus giving them the appearance almost, of wildmen. They did not have the rosy hues of days in the past when arising from the clean and restful bed under the home roof, yet these men standing in battle-line were scarcely old enough to be men and voters at home. They had grimy, sallow features and muscular bodies, lean and gaunt as hounds...for this was their third campaign since the spring flowers had bloomed.”

Private William Goodhue
3rd Wisconsin, Gordon’s Brigade,
Army of the Potomac, USA
Major Rufus R. Dawes  
6th Wisconsin, Gibbon’s Brigade, Army of the Potomac, USA

“…As we appeared at the edge of the corn, a long line of butternut and gray rose up from the ground. Simultaneously, the hostile battle lines opened a tremendous fire upon each other. Men, I can not say fell; they were knocked out of the ranks by the dozens. But we jumped up over the fence, and pushed on, loading, firing, and shouting as we advanced. There was, on the part of the men, great hysterical excitement, eagerness to go forward, and a reckless disregard of life, of every thing but victory…

Another line of our men came up through the corn. We all joined together, jumped over the fence, and again pushed out into the open field. There is a rattling fusilade and loud cheers. ‘Forward’ is the word. The men are loading and firing with demonical fury and shouting and laughing hysterically, and the whole field before us is covered with rebels fleeing for life, into the woods. Great numbers of them are shot while climbing over the high post and rail fences along the turnpike. We push on over the open fields half way to the little church…”

Lieutenant Colonel Phillip A. Work  
1st Texas, Wofford’s Brigade, Army of Northern Virginia, CSA

“…As the regiment no longer had the ability either to advance or resist attack effectively, and in addition, as its line of retreat was in momentary danger of being cut off by the Federals who were firing into our left from the rear, I directed Capt. Woodward to retire the left and myself proceeded to withdraw the right wing.

Falling back to the Southward limit of the corn patch, I directed the few who had emerged from the corn to rally upon a squad of perhaps thirty men who were gathered about a Confederate battle flag some thirty to forty yards to the Northwest of us and resisting the advance of Federal infantry, whilst I remained to forward on others as they might appear from without the corn. Just as the few had started for the battle flag mentioned, Captain Woodward cried out substantially, ‘The flags, the flags. Where are the flags? The bearers are shot down and I’ll get them,’ and suiting the action to the word, rushed back into the corn to recover them. He had proceeded but a short distance when he came face to face with the advancing enemy, and returned without them.”
Corporal Abial Hall Edwards
10th Maine, Crawford’s Brigade, Army of the Potomac, USA

“…we was marched up to a short distance General Mansfield leading Reg- we was marched up to a wood the Rebels being in it then we commenced. It was terrible beyond description if it had not been for the trees serving as a protection for us our Regiment must have been terribly annihilated as it was we suffered badly. The noble General Mansfield that led us in was mortally wounded and died shortly after. Our Colonel G L Beal was wounded badly also our Lieut Colonel and Major was wounded slightly out of my Company the[re] was three killed and several wounded. I have not yet found out our loss in killed & wounded but it will be between 30 & 40 killed and many wounded. The Battle raged all day the bursting of the shells the groans of the wounded & Dying made a scene that was awful beyond description. I hope I shall never see such another as it is the Rebels are drove from Maryland…”
Captain James Cooper Nisbet  
21st Georgia, J.A. Walker’s Brigade, Army of Northern Virginia, CSA

“...Our Lieutenant Colonel Glover was shot through the body as the order for us to advance was sent down the line. I took command, being the senior officer present. I instructed the regiment to go at double quick, open order, until they got to the fence across the Smoketown road. The enemy in the woods in our front opened on us and the left regiment, fighting Lawton’s Brigade, commenced to fire at us left-oblique. A number of our men were hit.

As I threw my leg over the top of the rail of the last fence, a minnie ball went through the rail, the folds of my blanket and oil cloth, striking me squarely on the sword clasp. I fell into the road unconscious, lying upon elevated ground. I recovered my senses in a few minutes and the men seeing the earth around me cut by the bullets, called to me: ‘Crawl down here, Captain.’

I crawled down to where the men were firing through the rail fence...

Captain M.T. Castleberry of Company ‘C,’ started to ask me about Blevins’ wound; a ball went into his mouth, and through his head. He fell against the fence, his lying low and bent back. I pulled him around so as to elevate his head and put a cartridge box under it. As I did so, I heard our boys crying out: ‘They are running!’ Looking over the fence I saw that the Yankee line was falling back into the woods. I sent word to Lawton’s right regiment that we were going to advance in their front. I then ordered the 21st forward.

When we reached the woods the enemy was gone...”
Passing the road, we entered a thin belt of wood. I had hardly stepped into the wood when in an instant our left became engaged. The right advanced to the front of the wood and into the open field about 20 feet, when I discovered the Rebels a distance of perhaps 30 or 40 rods in strong force. We halted and at it we went. I never had a better chance at them in my life. Well, I guess the bullets flew for about 18 or 20 minits just as fast as we could get them in and out of our guns. I saw a Confederate Officer sitting on a horse up on a knoll. I thought I could fetch him off that horse, but after trying 3 or 4 times, I give it up thinking I might do better to fire at the crowd. So I don't know whether I hit any body or not. Now the reb's began to fall back. I thought to myself, we have got you now. But at almost the same time I heard a voice from the rear crying out 'Fall back.' I turned around and said, what does that mean, ain't the reb's falling back themselves. But again the cry 'Fall Back.' Now some one yelled out, 'we are flanked, the reb's are in our rear.' I looked and Ah, it was too true. In a minute all was confusion, it was every man for himself. We all run like a flock of sheep. The reb's saw their advantage and with Grape and Canister and Musketery they mowed us down...As soon as we got back a short distance, Ricketts Battery opened with Grape and Canister. This had a good effect on checking the reb's until we got out of the way. We had two Batteries up the road or near the road on the same side we had fought, We fell back on to those and reformed as fast as we could find our men. Some did not appear until the next day.
Corporal John T. Parham  
32nd Virginia, Semmes’ Brigade, Army of Northern Virginia, CSA

“…On we went until we reached a rocky knoll about, I should judge, seventy-five or one hundred yards from a stone fence, which the enemy were behind, pouring a shower of minies at us. At that point our loss was terrible. The ranks were so scattered, and the dead and wounded so thick, it seemed as if we could go no further. Our rear rank was ten or more paces in our rear, and we were in danger of being shot by our own men. Our flag was shot through seventeen times, and the staff cut in two. I don’t think our color-bearer, Bob Forrest, was hurt. I was slightly wounded in the wrist and foot, and it seemed to me that most everybody near the flag was either killed or wounded. Both of my jacket sleeves were bespotted with blood and brains of my comrades near me.

At this time General Semmes came to our colors, and saw me still shooting away as fast as I could load, and asked where the enemy was located. I told him behind the fence in front. He said, ‘Yes, and they will kill us to the last one of us, and that we must charge them.’ He gave the command to charge. Bob Forrest went forward several paces in front and waited for the line of battle to come up, and Lieutenant Henry St. Clair, of Company I, ran up to him and said, ‘Bob Forrest, why in the h-ll don’t you go forward with the flag; if you won’t go, give it to me,’ and started for it. Bob Forrest, as brave a man as ever lived, said to him, ‘You shan’t have it; I will carry this flag as far as any man; bring your line up and we will all go up together.’ They did come up, and took the fence and drove the enemy up the hill.”
Colonel Jacob Higgins
125th Pennsylvania, Crawford's Brigade, Army of the Potomac, USA

“…They were all blazing away, and I discovered that every officer of the 125th had a musket, firing with the men. I ordered the Adjunct down the line to direct the men to fall back, or they would be all captured, but the brave boy soon fell mortally wounded. By this time that rebel yell, so well known to us afterward, sounded above the din of battle. On they came in solid columns like an avalanche that threatened to sweep all before it, yet the regiment would not move. I yelled at the top of my voice, and verily likely said something else, but the men kept firing away into the surging mass in their front until the Confederate column came so close as to shout for us to surrender. Then the 125th broke on a run to the rear.

By this time one of the Confederate regiments that came up back of the church had passed half its length in rear of our regiment marching in columns of fours, and the right of our regiment was running toward Rickett’s battery, that we had been supporting before we were ordered into the woods. I passed through the Confederate regiment right at its colors. I raised my hand to seize the flag, but something told me I had better not, and I dropped my hand and jostled through the ranks. They had not spoken a word…So many of their men wore blue coats, and the rest of their column was right on our heel they took it for granted that we were Confederates…”
Lieutenant Charles B. Tanner  
1st Delaware, Weber’s Brigade, Army of the Potomac, USA

“…Madden, and more desperate than ever, I called for the men to make another effort, and before we marched fifty yards only a scattering few remained able to get back to the friendly corn, in which we sought refuge from the tempest of death…

While covering that short distance, it seemed as if millions of bees were singing in the air. The shouts and yells from either side sounded like menaces and threats. But I had reached the goal, had caught up the staff which was already splintered by shot, and the colors pierced with many a hole, and stained here and there with the lifeblood of our comrades, when a bullet shattered my arm. Luckily my legs were still serviceable, and, seizing the precious bunting with my left hand, I made the best eighty-yard time on record, receiving two more wounds.

The colors were landed safely among the men of our regiment just as a large body of Confederate infantry poured in on our flank, compelling us to face in a different direction. We had the flags, however, and the remainder of the First Delaware held them against all comers.”
Colonel John B. Gordon  
6th Alabama, Rodes’ Brigade, Army of Northern Virginia, CSA  

“…There was no artillery at this point upon either side, and not a rifle was discharged. The stillness was literally oppressive, as in close order, with the commander still riding in front, this column of Union infantry moved majestically in the charge. In a few minutes they were within easy range of our rifles, and some of my impatient men asked permission to fire. ‘Not yet,’ I replied. ‘Wait for the order.’ Soon they were so close that we might have seen the eagles on their buttons; but my brave and eager boys still waited for the order. Now the front rank was within a few rods of where I stood. It would not do to wait another second, and with all my lung power I shouted ‘Fire!’ My rifles flamed and roared in the Federals’ faces like a blinding blaze of lightning accompanied by the quick and deadly thunderbolt. The effect was appalling. The entire front line, with few exceptions, went down in the consuming blaze. The gallant commander and his horse fell in a heap near where I stood - the horse dead, the rider unhurt. Before his rear lines could recover from the terrific shock, my exultant men were on their feet, devouring them with successive volleys.”
“…Forward we go over fences and through an apple orchard. Now we are close to the enemy. They rise up in a sunken lane and pour a deadly fire into us. Our men drop in every few files. The ground on which we are charging has no depression, no shelter of any kind. There is nothing to do but advance or break into a rout. We know there is no support behind us on this side of the creek. So we go forward on the run, heads downward as if under a pelting rain.

About fifty yards on this side of the enemy’s improvised trench in the sunken road is a slight elevation. Here we halt. The ground is covered with a soft turf speckled with white clover. This ridge is a cornfield, and just back of it we can see the tops of the trees of an orchard. Line after line of the enemy’s troops are advancing along the ridge, through the corn. They come up opposite us and sink out of sight in the sunken lane. It is a mystery that so many men could crowd into so small a space.

In the meantime the work of death and destruction goes on…

The fight goes on with unabated fury. The air is alive with the concussion of all sorts of explosions. We are kneeling in the soft grass and I notice for a long time that almost every blade of grass is moving. For sometime I supposed that this is caused by the merry crickets; and it is not until I have made a remark to that effect to one of our boys near me and notice him laugh, that I know it is the bullets that are falling thickly around us! It is wonderful how a man can live through such close danger. I have made up my mind that I shall not, cannot escape…

Our men are falling fast. General Kimball passes, muttering, ‘God save my poor boys.’ Well ought he to pray to God in such a moment.

The din is frightful. Alas, no words can depict the horrors of a great battle as they appear to men unaccustomed to them. We had seen a great deal of service before now; but our fighting had mostly been of the desultory, skirmishing sort. What we see now looks to us like systematic killing.”
Captain James Graham  
27th North Carolina, Cooke’s Brigade, Army of Northern Virginia, CSA

“…Colonel Cooke, learning this fact, and seeing that we were not supported in our charge, ordered us to fall back to our original position. This, of course, was done at double-quick. As we returned we experienced the perfidy of those who had previously surrendered to us and whom we had not taken time to disarm. They, seeing that we were not supported, attempted to form a line in our rear and in a few minutes would have done so. As it was, we had to pass between two fires, a part of the troops having been thrown back to oppose our movement on their flank and those supposed prisoners having formed on the other side. A bloody lane indeed it proved to us. Many a brave man lost his life in that retreat. At some points our lines were not sixty yards distant on either side of us. Arriving at our original position both regiments halted and were soon reformed…”
Surgeon Theodore Dimon  
2nd Maryland, Nagle’s Brigade, Army of the Potomac, USA

“…So he took the head of the Regiment and filed it down the gulch to the river bottom. I followed along.

As we got to level ground on the border of the stream, the bridge was in sight to the right some two or three hundred yards off. The Regiment flanked off across some ploughed ground towards the bridge, the Colonel at the head, pulling down fences. On the opposite side of the stream, some 100 yards or so off, the bank rose perpendicular some 20 or 30 feet, and had been dug out on that side at the bridge end for the road which came from the right of it. The crest of the opposite bank was fringed with bushes and some willow and other trees also grew there. These bushes concealed from sight the enemy, who were laying there waiting till their fire would tell the best.

I was taking observations for a place for the wounded and noticed a barn built of round poles and covered with thatch just to the left of me, and a pool of good-looking water just in front of me. I unhitched my tin cup and stooped to take a drink of the water. Just at this instant, the enemy poured in there volley. It had seemed comparatively still before that, but now it seemed as if all the noises in the world had broken out at once. The batteries were pretty close down on both sides and they all opened. I noticed some splendid practice of our batteries, their shells bursting just as the willows and limbs of them dropping into the stream, cut off by their fragments…

The Regiment still moving by flank, and at this time all alone, was stopped to throw down the last fence on the other side of the field. Duryea had just thrown down the last rail, and as he looked back, he saw the Regiment shrinking and elbowing out under this tremendous fire and just ready to break. The ploughed furrows were thickly dotted with fallen men when down the line came his peculiar-keyed voice which could be, and was, heard through all that infernal noise. ‘What the hell you doing there? Straighten that line there, forward.’ The line straightened, like straightening your arm, and on it went for the bridge.”
Lieutenant Theodore T. Fogle
2nd Georgia Infantry, Toombs’ Brigade, Army of Northern Virginia, CSA

“At a bridge on the Antietam Creek our Regiment & the 20th Ga., in all amounting to not over 300 muskets held them in check for four hours & a half & then we fell back only because our ammunition was exhausted, but we suffered badly, eight cannon just five hundred yards off were pouring grape shot, shell and cannister into us & our artillery could not silence them. We held our post until Major Harris (Cousin William) ordered us to fall back. Our Col. (Col. Holmes of Burke County Ga) was killed about half an hour before. He was as brave a man as I ever saw. He was perfectly cool & calm & and did not seem to know what the word danger meant, he had won the confidence of the regiment as the battle of Manassas, poor man he was pierced by three balls after he received his death wound. We could not bring his remains off the field. Three men tried it & two of them were shot down. I wanted to go with them but I knew it was not right to expose myself in that way. Col. Holmes was dead & and it was not right for us to risk our lives simply to get his body off the field. Maj. Harris is a brave man but I don’t think is quite cool enough. He was struck on the arm but the ball did not enter, only gave him a pretty bad bruise. We went into the fight with only 89 muskets & had eight officers & 35 men killed & wounded. So many of the men were shot that the officers filled their places & loaded & fired their guns. I fired only once & that was at a bunch of six or seven Yankees not more than 60 yards off. The musket was a smooth bore & loaded with a ball & three buckshot. I won’t say whether I hit my mark or not. Mother, I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt.”
Private David Thompson
9th New York Volunteers, Fairchild’s Brigade, Army of the Potomac, USA

“...As the range grew better, the firing became more rapid, the situation desperate and exasperating to the last degree. Human nature was on the rack, and there burst forth from it the most vehement, terrible swearing I have ever heard. Certainly the joy of the conflict was not ours that day. The suspense was only for a moment, however, for the order to charge came just after. Whether the regiment was thrown into disorder or not, I never knew. I only remember that we rose and started all the fire that had been held back so long was loosed. In a second the air was full of the hiss of bullets and the hurtle of grape-shot. The mental strain was so great that I saw at that moment the singular effect mentioned, I think, in the life of Goethe on a similar occasion - the whole landscape for an instant turned slightly red. I see again, as I saw it then in a flash, a man just in front of me drop his musket and throw up his hands, stung into vigorous swearing by a bullet behind the ear. Many men fell going up the hill, but it seemed to be all over in a moment...”
Gettysburg

July 1-3, 1863

“He ordered to ‘Forward into line’ at a double quick and ordered them to charge into the woods, leading the Charge in person; the Regiment Charged into the woods nobly, but the enemy was too strong, and they had to give way to the right. The enemy still pushed on, and was now not much more than 60 paces from where the Gen’l was. Minie Balls were flying thick. The Gen’l turned to look towards the Seminary, (I suppose to see if the other troops were coming on,) as he did so, a Minie Ball Struck him in the back of the neck, and he fell from his horse dead. He never spoke a word, or moved, a muscle after he was struck. I have seen many men killed in action but never saw a ball do its work so instantly, as did the ball which struck General Reynolds, a man who knew not what fear or danger was, in a word, was [one] of our very best Generals. Where ever the fight raged fiercest, there the General was sure to be found, his undaunted Courage always inspired the men with more energy & courage. He would never order a body of troops where he had not been himself, or where he did not dare to go.”

Sergeant Charles A. Veil
Reynolds’ Staff, First Corps,
Army of the Potomac, USA
Lieutenant William B. Taylor
11th North Carolina, Pettigrew's Brigade, Army of Northern Virginia, CSA

“I was hit by a grape shot but it die know damage. O! my sock leg was shot through & my sword scabbard was struck so you can imagine how thick the balls were….you ought to have seen our brigade when it charged we drove the enemy like sheep it was through an open field and it was at an awful cost but we paid it to them two fold the Iron Brigade Yankeys tried to stand but it was know use we stood within 20 yards of each other for about 15 minutes but they had to give way and when they [did] we just mowed them down we had 8 killed on the field instantly and 2 wounded that died since…”

Private Roswell L. Root
24th Michigan, Iron Brigade, Army of the Potomac, USA

“July 1st. Memorable Wednesday morning we was ordered to march and on we went till the crack of muskets and the roar of cannons brought us to a halt. But it was not long before we went on come up to the enemy without our guns being loaded and they volly after volly into our ranks, one which br’ot our noble color bearer down. Yet on we went and at the same time loading our guns and coming into line. And then charge on then was the order and we charged and captured their whole line of battle, or most of it….And at about 4 p.m. we saw the Rebs come in force with three lines of battle to our one and we was shamefully ordered to stand them without support either troops or cannon. Thus we stood in line and fired for 20 minutes while they had three line firing into ours. After we was all cut up they ordered a retreat of which was done in some confusion.”
“The very guns became things of life - not implements, but comrades. Every man was doing the work of two or three. At our gun at the finish there were only the Corporal, No. 1 and No. 2, with two drivers fetching ammunition. The water in Pat's bucket was like ink. His face and hands were smeared all over with burnt powder...Between the black of the burnt powder and the crimson streaks from his bloody head, Packard looked like a demon from below! Up and down the line men reeling and falling; splinters flying from wheels and axles where bullets hit; in rear horses tearing and plunging, mad with wounds or terror; drivers yelling, shells bursting, shot shrieking overhead, howling about our ears of throwing up great clouds of dust where they had struck; the musketry crashing on three sides of us; bullets hissing, humming, and whistling everywhere; cannon roaring; all crash on crash and peal on peal, smoke dust, splinters, blood, wreck and carnage indescribable, but the brass guns of Old B still bellowed and not a man or boy flinched or faltered...Out in front of us an undulating field, filled almost as far as the eye could reach with a long, low, gray line creeping toward us, fairly fringed with flame...”
Lieutenant William Remington
6th Wisconsin, Iron Brigade, Army of the Potomac, USA

“I got hit just at this time on the left side of my neck. It was not of enough account to hardly draw blood. I got quite near the flag, was changing my sword to my left hand, where my revolver was, when I saw a soldier taking aim at me from the railroad cut. I threw my right shoulder forward and kept going for the flag. He hit me through the right shoulder and knocked me down. When I fell I threw my right shoulder forward and kept going for the flag. I crawled forward, got up, and walked backward until I got through our regiment, spoke to Major Hauser, got d----d for going after the flag and started for the rear on my best run. Flag-taking was pretty well knocked out of me.”
Colonel David Wyatt Aiken  
7th South Carolina, Kershaw’s Brigade, Army of Northern Virginia, CSA

“About noon the cannonading began, & by 2 PM we were ordered to advance with the infantry, which we did in fine stile directly in front of the cannon not 1000 yds distant, which immediately began playing on Kershaws Brig, the most exposed, having to advance from behind the stone wall just in the edge of the woods through a large level clover field. Just before we moved a shell struck my color guard, killing two men & wounding three. We moved up though quietly not able to shoot a gun for some time. Presently we came upon the Infantry, the artillery retiring, and then we went at it in earnest. We fought for half hour or more, and drove the enemy for half a mile perhaps, and during my experience I have never seen so much damage done both parties in so short a space of time. I had 18 killed, several wounded, some twenty only stunned by shells who have already reported for duty. My Regt suffered about as all the other Regts in the Brigd. Sixteen of my men lost arms or legs. That night we lay on the Battle field, and next morning by daylight were ordered to advance amid the groans of the wounded (our’s had been moved back) and over the dead of both parties.”
Private William A. Fletcher  
5th Texas, Law’s Brigade, Army of Northern Virginia, CSA

“...We were soon forward and near the opposite side of the valley. We routed pickets and scaled rock fences, and worked our way to the front rapidly, with pickets giving away before us, firing but little. We soon struck the foot of the hill, and found it rough and rocky, with large boulders now and then so our lines were not at all times well closed. We soon were near enough the enemy’s line for them to open fire. We had but poor chance to retaliate with much effect. Our men near me commenced falling rapidly and especially color bearers - if I remember correctly, I saw the colors fall five ties, that last time in the hands of the sergeant who had ordered me to act as color guard. In falling, the flag staff struck my head in front of my face. As it went down my forward motion caused my feet to become somewhat tangled. I gave a kick and said a curse word, and passed on.”
Colonel William C. Oates  
15th Alabama, Law's Brigade, Army of Northern Virginia, CSA

“I ordered my regiment to change direction to the left [to face toward the west], swing around, and drive the Federals from the ledge, for the purpose of enfilading their line, relieving the Forty-seventh Alabama -- gain the enemy’s rear, and drive him from the hill. My men obeyed and advanced about halfway to the enemy’s position, but the fire was so destructive that my line wavered like a man trying to walk against a strong wind, and then slowly, doggedly, gave back a little; then with no one upon the left or right of me, my regiment exposed, while the enemy was still under cover, to stand there and die was sheer folly; either to retreat or advance became a necessity.”

Private Theodore Gerrish  
20th Maine, Vincent’s Brigade, Army of Northern Virginia, USA

“But the enemy was pouring a terrible fire upon us, his superior forces giving him a great advantage. Ten to one are fearful odds where men are contending for so great a prize. The air seemed to be alive with lead. The lines at times were so near each other that the hostile gun barrels almost touched. As the contest continued, the rebels grew desperate that so insignificant a force should hold them in check. At one time there was a brief lull in the carnage, and our shattered line was closed up, but soon the contest raged again with renewed fierceness. The rebels had been reinforced and were now determined to sweep our regiment from the crest of Little Round Top.”
Bugler Charles Wellington Reed
9th Massachusetts Battery, Army of the Potomac, USA

“...our men fought bravely[,] we are proud of all of our officers they were constantly in the thickest of the fighting[,] about the time we had put the quietus to that Reb battery down come the rebs along a road from the right behind a white fence when opposite us they left flanked and steadily advanced on us giving us a shower of small balls that it was dangerous to be safe! such a shrieking, hissing, seathing I never dreamed was imagineable. it seemed as though it must be the work of the very devil himself. then some new Batterys opened on us a cross fire with shell and solid shot[,] their fire was about this time was tremendous[,] there were five Batterys of us in line ours on the left besides other artillery in different positions the roar of which was deafening[,] many of our men had fallen but we were intent upon our work that we noticed not when the other batterys left and the infantry had deserted us and we were left in most critical position[.]”
First Lieutenant Randolph McKim  
Steuart’s Brigade, Army of Northern Virginia, CSA

“...I led the regiment up the hill, guided only by the flashes of the muskets, until I reached a position abreast of our line of fire on the right. In front, a hundred yards or so, I saw another line of fire, but owing to the thick foliage could not determine whether the musket flashes were up or down the hill. Finding that the bullets were whistling over our heads, I concluded the force in our front must be the enemy, and seeing, as I thought, an admirable chance of turning their flank, I urged Colonel Brown to move rapidly forward and fire. When we reached what I supposed the proper position, I shouted ‘Fire on them, boys; fire on them!’

At that moment Major Parsley, the gallant officer in command of the Third North Carolina, rushed up and shouted, ‘They are our own men!’

Owing to the din of battle the command to fire had not been heard except by those nearest me, and I believe no injury resulted from my mistake...”
Second Lieutenant William Lochren
1st Minnesota, Harrow’s Brigade, Army of the Potomac, USA

“Silently, without orders, and, almost from the start, double-quick had changed to utmost speed, for in utmost speed lay the only hope that any of us would pass through that storm of lead and strike the enemy. ‘Charge!’ shouted Colvill, as we neared their first line; and with leveled bayonets, at full speed, we rushed upon it; fortunately, as it was slightly disordered in crossing a dry brook at the foot of a slope. The men were never made who will stand against leveled bayonets coming with such momentum and evident desperation. The first, line broke in our front as we reached it, and rushed back through the second line, stopping the whole advance. We then poured on our first fire, and availing ourselves of such shelter as the low banks of the dry brook afforded, held the entire force at bay for a considerable time.”
Major Henry Livermore Abbot  
20th Massachusetts, Hall’s Brigade, Army of Northern Virginia, USA

“…Had our batteries been intact, the rebels would have never gotten up to our musketry, for they were obliged to come out of the woods & advance from a half to ¾ of a mile over an open field & in plain sight. A magnificent sight it was too. Two brigades in two lines, their skirmishers driving in ours.  
The moment I saw them I knew we should give them Fredericksburg. So did everybody. We let the regiment in front of us get within 100 feet of us, & then bowled them over like nine pins, picking out the colors first. In two minutes there were only groups of two or three men running around like chickens with their heads off. We were cheering like mad, when Macy directed my attention to a spot 3 or 4 rods on our right where there were no pits, only a rail fence, Baxter’s Pennsylvania men had most disgracefully broken, & the rebels were within our line…the danger was so imminent that I had rushed my company up to the gap, & the regiment & the rest of the brigade, being there some before & and the rest as quick as they could. The rail fence checked the main advance of the enemy & the stood, both sides pegging away into each other.  
The rows of dead after the battle I found to be within 15 and 20 feet apart, as near to hand to hand fighting as I ever care to see. The rebels behaved with as much pluck as any men in the world could; they stood a there, against the fence, until they were all shot down…”
Captain Henry T. Owen
18th Virginia, Pickett's Division, Army of Northern Virginia, CSA

“There it was again! and again! A sound filling the air above, below, and around us, like…the whirring sound made by the sudden flight of a flock of quail. It was grape and canister, and the column broke forward into a double quick and rushed toward the stone wall where forty cannon were belching forth grape and canister twice and thrice a minute. A hundred yards from the stone wall the flanking party on the right, coming down on a heavy run, halted suddenly within fifty yards and poured a deadly storm of musket balls into Pickett’s men, double-quicking across their front, and, under this terrible cross fire the men reeled and staggered between falling comrades and the right came pressing down upon the centre, crowding the companies in confusion. But all knew the purpose to carry the heights in front, and he mingled mass from fifteen to thirty deep, rushed toward the stone wall…. Muskets were seen crossed as some fired to the right, and others to the front and the fighting was terrific--far beyond all other experience even of Pickett’s men…. The old veterans saw the fearful odds against them and the other hosts gathering darker and deeper still.

The time was too precious, serious for a cheer; they buckled down to the heavy task in silence, and fought with a feeling like despair. On swept the column over ground covered with the dead and dying men, where the earth seemed to be on fire, the smoke dense and suffocating, the sun shut out, flames blazing on every side, friend could hardly be distinguished from foe, but the division…pushed forward, fighting, falling and melting away, till half way up the hill they were met by a powerful body of fresh troops charging down upon them…”
Concluding Remarks

Encountering my creation, a project in development for nearly two years, finally as a tangible publication, only utters contemplation and reflection of the arduous, meandering course that has brought me to such an end, and beginning.

In the fall of 2004, my first semester at UMD, the Keystone Project (a requirement of the Honors Humanities program) struck me as both an unanticipated endeavor and opportunity. My earliest inklings were vague, of course, but unified in their conception of a project which would combine both creative and research approaches. In the spring, I wrote initial proposals and researched potentially useful sources. These primarily included published writings from Civil War soldiers, as well as examples of contemporary battlefield photography. I had not only gathered significant parts of the project, but discovered models to help envision the end results. As I left the campus atmosphere behind, replete with an extensive bibliography, I moved into a critical stage: collecting and evaluating my primary sources, and coordinating photographic expeditions to Antietam and Gettysburg battlefields.

I found it not only necessary to read through all the accounts, as well as John Michael Priest’s Antietam: A Soldier’s Battle, but to determine which provided an interesting portrait of the combat while also maintaining a certain amount of balance in the point of view (Union/Confederate) and battlefield location. Next, to make an organized effort once at the site, I located the position of the soldiers during the battles and placed these as accurately as possible on my various maps. For reference in this task I used maps of reconstructed troop positions, my knowledge of the battlefields, and clues within the accounts themselves. By mid-July I was prepared to visit Gettysburg, and with some further work, Antietam in early August.

On the morning of July 19 I set out for Gettysburg, with my uncle
behind the wheel of a car fated to foil my efforts. After making the customary pilgrimage to the visitor center (including its ancient relic - the persistently entertaining “Electric Map”), we arrived on the portion of the field which contained the site of the battle’s earliest fighting. As my relatives departed to explore another location, and the temperature rose, I began to take my first photographs near and in a small wood. But unfortunately, as I emerged from the undergrowth, there appeared my uncle with news of car trouble. Although I hurriedly managed to snare a few more shots along a nearby ridge, I had only garnered a total of eight photographs that day.

The only opportunity to return to the Gettysburg battlefield was on the day assigned for my venture to Sharpsburg, August 11. It seemed my father and I would be visiting both on what would become a surprisingly long and exhausting day. We arrived early in western Maryland, and by 8:30 I was at work along a rock strewn forest. Before we headed across the Mason-Dixon Line, in the footsteps of Lee’s second invasion, I would find myself lost in a cornfield, hacking through more undergrowth, sweltering in open fields, and even on my father’s shoulders -- all for the sake of getting a shot to tell a story. With an afternoon thunderstorm mounting in the heavens, I was once again in Gettysburg. Fortunately the showers struck during a lunch break, leaving behind a damp battlefield. We worked northward from the southern extremities of the military park, and against a waning, haze-obscured sun. Again, I was immersed in thick fields, woods, and rocks gracing the many ridges and hills beyond the town: the set of the continent’s most brutal days. At dusk, concluding with the area around the symbolic “High Tide” of the Confederacy, we retired from the endeavor.

During my next fall semester it was necessary to complete some sort of a rough draft of my project. Therefore, I created a finalized version of my chosen personal accounts, and drafted those writings which would
accompany and enhance the bulk of the project. And at last, in January, with the aid of my grandfather and his darkroom, I was finally able to develop and print the photographs so critical to my vision and the comprehension of these events and people.

Before ending, I would like to merely comment on the unexpected opportunity I have embraced within this project. First, is the connection to history, specifically the experience of the American pitted against fellow countrymen in the chaos of battle, that I encountered in this process: standing in open field or tangled undergrowth, envisioning the terror, courage, spectacle -- with dead men’s words as guide -- of the national crisis which made farmland hallowed. In the steps of soldiers, many no older than myself, I traversed a sacred terrain hoping that my vision could convey that which truly requires contact with these battlefields, and the memory of those interred within. And second, the project has affected my future approach to history. It is only a beginning, a novel experience steeped in learning; although complete, it is still unfinished. From this initial attempt, I can improve, expand, and create new possibilities -- all to enhance the stories which need to be told, considered, and remembered.
About the Author

A resident scholar at the University of Maryland, College Park, **Tom Decker** currently majors in both History and English, while also participating in the Honors Humanities Program. With roots in Pennsylvania, he permanently resides with his family in Elkton, MD. The publication of this work now erases his former most significant achievement: 4th place in the state Geography Bee. He would like thank his family, especially his grandfather, certain uncles, and his father for their help in completing this project without which it would be just a bunch of quotations, although significant in their own right, but far from what he envisioned. For offering guidance throughout the process, and an enthusiasm to match his own, he also extends many thanks to Tanya Jung.
Bibliography


