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Gettysburg's Tragedy in Virginia

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Gettysburg's Tragedy in Virginia

Abstract

Jacob and John Kitzmiller were brothers-in-arms, fighting through the thickets of Virginia with the 138th Pennsylvania. And spring of 1864 was one hell of a slog.

The two boys were the youngest members of their family. When the war erupted, their mother and father, Samuel and Jane, lived alongside their daughter Catharine. Jacob was an apprentice blacksmith in B.G. Holabaugh's shop. John still lived at home with his parents. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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TUESDAY, JUNE 3, 2014

Jacob and John Kitzmiller were brothers-in-arms, fighting through the thickets of Virginia with the 138th Pennsylvania. And spring of 1864 was one hell of a slog.

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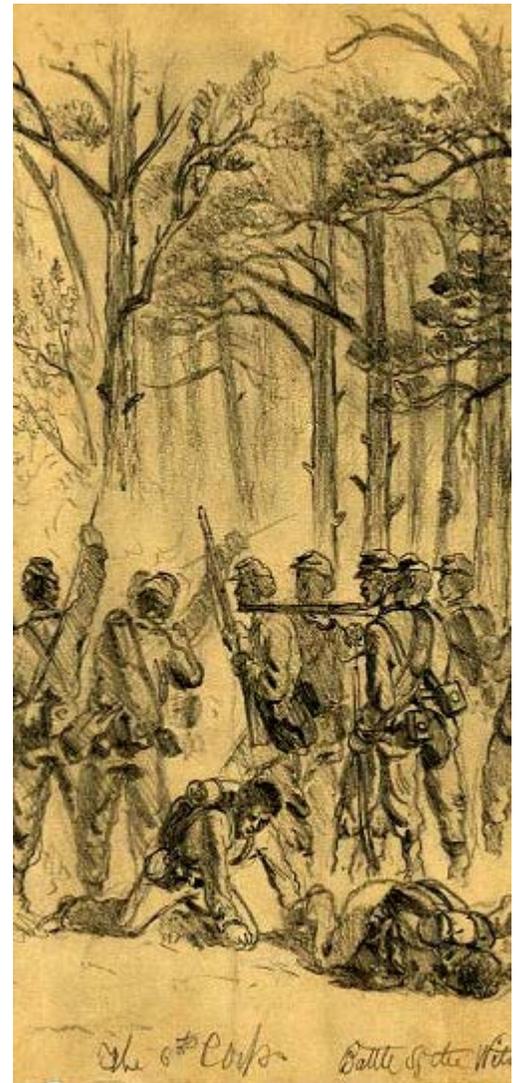
August of 1862, the brothers joined the army alongside dozens of other men from Adams County. Company B of the 138th was chock full of names which still bedeck Adams County's mailboxes and backroads.

But while battle raged at home in July of 1863, while rebel bullets threatened mother, father and sister, the Kitzmiller boys found themselves guarding quartermaster stores en route to Washington alongside the Potomac. While men proved their mettle in the streets where the Kitzmillers grew up, they were guarding crates of hardtack and shelter halves.

But the two brothers eventually found the war. The 138th Pennsylvania bounced around the Army of the Potomac, finally landing in the 6th Corps in time for the battle in the Wilderness in 1864.

The men from Adams County charged through a tight bramble just north of Saunder's Field, while the forest roiled with smoke and fire in the chaotic battle. And somewhere in the fray, the two Kitzmillers stood in line of battle.

Were Jacob and John near each other? Did they stand shoulder to shoulder, to brothers on an adventure. The blacksmith Jacob and his little brother John were somewhere in that hellish scene, the scent of brimstone from charred gunpowder curling through their nostrils.



The 138th's VI Corps fighting through the Wilderness

Then Jacob felt a sharp pain in his strong left arm. That muscle which had steadied hot iron against an anvil, learning the trade of the noble blacksmith, dangled limp and shattered. Tragedy had struck.

Jacob lost his arm after being dragged to a field hospital. His war was over. But so was his life as he had imagined it.

And John fought on alongside the Bieseckers and McCrearys and Deardorffs. His brother was no longer there. Was it harder? Where did he find the strength to keep on marching forward? War had stolen his brother's arm. And here John stood, still on the front line.

He didn't have to fear for long.

Almost as an afterthought, in the [Compiler in the first few weeks of June](#), the notice ran. "A letter just received from Lieut. Earnshaw, of Co. B, 138th Reg., states the casualties in the company as follows: - Killed, John Kitzmiller."

Just two years earlier, Kitzmiller's death might have warranted a full column of text, a eulogy for a young man destroyed in his prime. It might have called for fanfare, for pomp and circumstance. But reality had struck Gettysburg with a vengeance. For a town which had witnessed the deaths of 10,000 men, who had watched as three times that many others limped or rolled through their streets, what was one more lifeless form to be added to the grotesque pile?

But the two boys weren't just lifeless forms. They were a son shattered and a son killed. For the Kitzmiller family in Gettysburg, 1863 may have been tough. But 1864 was an absolute tragedy. One insignificant name in a newspaper, hearing your son has lost his left arm, is enough to shatter a mother's heart, leave a father crippled with grief. Worrying over that young man, now missing his trade and writhing in pain in a Washington City hospital must be sheer agony for a mother. And agony becomes inconsolable when a second name, dropped nonchalantly by a typesetter in a newspaper office on Baltimore Street, reaches the Kitzmillers' eyes.

Gettysburg might have been deadened to tragedy, but that didn't stop tragedy from squeezing its way through the tough exterior to shatter heart after heart in 1864.