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Gettysburg Valor Honored At Last

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Abstract

There is no expiration date on valor. This is the lesson on display today at the White House, as President Obama awards the Medal of Honor to a soldier who died 151 years ago at the climax of the Battle of Gettysburg. Alonzo Cushing was a lowly lieutenant, two years out of West Point at that battle. But he commanded the last two cannon that faced Pickett's Charge, and what he did with them has kept memory alive. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Disciplines

History | Military History | United States History

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By: Allen C. Guelzo

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There is no expiration date on valor. This is the lesson on display today at the White House, as President Obama awards the Medal of Honor to a soldier who died 151 years ago at the climax of the Battle of Gettysburg. Alonzo Cushing was a lowly lieutenant, two years out of West Point at that battle. But he commanded the last two cannon that faced Pickett's Charge, and what he did with them has kept memory alive.

Alonzo Hereford Cushing was one of three sons born to a doctor-turned-merchant in Delafield, Wis., in 1841. His father died when he was six, and the penniless family had few options for any form of education except the nation's military academies. In 1857 Alonzo was packed off to West Point. "His mother is poor," wrote the congressman who had recommended him, "but highly committed and her son will do honor to the position."

He graduated in June 1861, 10th in his class of 35. The Civil War was two months old, and Cushing was at once commissioned as a first lieutenant in Battery G, 4th U.S. Artillery. He was sent to train as best he could the haphazard collection of militia and volunteers who had gathered in Washington, D.C., to slay the rebel dragon at one blow.

Nothing nearly so neat occurred. Cushing was hurriedly posted to join the straggling federal forces who marched out to the first battle of Bull Run in July, only to spend most of the battle covering their humiliating retreat. Cushing was in no mood for retreats. "I did some of the prettiest firing that was done that day," he wrote to his mother, "You ought to have seen me pour . . . shell into their columns."

Cushing's war became quieter after the hard-nosed Maj. Gen. Edwin Sumner, who liked the young lieutenant's aggressiveness, tapped him for staff work at his headquarters. But Cushing eventually grew restless for action, and declined a permanent staff appointment. He returned to front-line service with Battery A, 4th U.S. Artillery, and won a brevet (honorary) promotion to captain, and then to major (again honorary), for service at the battles of Fredericksburg in December 1862 and Chancellorsville in early May 1863.

Cushing's ultimate test came as the Confederates lunged north into Pennsylvania and collided with the Union Army at Gettysburg. On July 3, 1863, after two days of intense fighting, Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee launched the combined divisions of George Pickett, Johnston Pettigrew and Isaac Trimble in an all-or-nothing assault on the Union position along Cemetery Ridge. The spear-point of Pickett's Charge headed for ground occupied by Cushing's battery of six cannon.

The battery was 20 yards behind a low stone wall on Cemetery Ridge, ready to support the Union infantry sheltering behind the wall. The Confederates began the assault with a lengthy artillery bombardment that put four of Cushing's guns out of action. But when his brigade commander,

Alexander Webb, predicted that "the Confederate infantry will now advance and attack our position," Cushing ordered the last two of his pieces run down to the wall, calling for volunteers from the infantry to replace his depleted gun crews and piling loose rounds of canister, a closed metal cylinder filled with round lead or iron balls, beside the guns.

Cushing was wounded in the shoulder, then in the groin. Instead of hobbling to safety, he was determined "to stay right here and fight it out or die in the attempt," according to Cushing's first sergeant, Frederick Fuger, writing in his postwar account.

When the Confederates were 400 yards away, Cushing opened fire with deadly rounds of canister. At 100 yards, he called for double and then triple loads of canister, cutting "immense gaps" in the Confederate attackers. "I will give them one last shot," Cushing cried, according to an article written by Gen. Alexander Webb in 1895. And then a slug slammed into Cushing's head, and down he went for good. But Pickett's Charge stalled, then melted backward, and the greatest battle of the Civil War was over. Sgt. Fuger counted "nearly six hundred dead Confederates in front of our battery."

No Medal of Honor was forthcoming for Cushing in 1863, however. The medal itself had only been instituted the year before, and the protocols for awarding it were vague (an entire Maine regiment was awarded the Medal of Honor just for re-enlisting in 1864). Nor was there a medal for Cushing's naval brother William, who led a daring nighttime raid that sank the Confederate ironclad Albemarle in 1864.

Benjamin Franklin once complained that republics are notoriously forgetful. But Cushing's long-awaited award today is proof that, even if memory is often short, valor is long. The nation joins the president in saluting Alonzo Cushing.

Mr. Guelzo is professor of the Civil War Era at Gettysburg College and the author of several books, including "Gettysburg: The Last Invasion" (Knopf, 2013).