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Noble Sacrifice or Meaningless Death? Interpreting the 116th PA Monument

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Abstract

Any visitor to the Gettysburg battlefield will no doubt be almost overwhelmed with the numbers of monuments and memorials to various Union and Confederate units strewn about the field. Sculpted soldiers with sabers, rifles, even fists raised in defiance of the enemy, ever charging forward into the heat of battle are commonplace. In the case of most Union monuments, a culture of just victory and celebration of noble sacrifice emanates from gray stones and bronze figures. One monument, however, tucked along Sickles Avenue in the Rose Woods, portrays a different message. The monument of the 116th Pennsylvania, erected by regimental survivors in 1888, is the only monument at Gettysburg that depicts a dead soldier. While other monuments, such as the Freemason monument at the Soldier's National Cemetery, the Louisiana state monument, and the Mississippi state monument depict wounded soldiers, these monuments are accompanied by themes of fraternity and noble sacrifice as the focal point rather than the fallen soldier himself. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, 116th Pennsylvania

Disciplines

History | Military History | United States History

Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Noble Sacrifice or Meaningless Death? Interpreting the 116th PA Monument

April 24, 2015

by Sarah Johnson '15

Any visitor to the Gettysburg battlefield will no doubt be almost overwhelmed with the numbers of monuments and memorials to various Union and Confederate units strewn about the field. Sculpted soldiers with sabers, rifles, even fists raised in defiance of the enemy, ever charging forward into the heat of battle are commonplace. In the case of most Union monuments, a culture of just victory and celebration of noble sacrifice emanates from gray stones and bronze figures. One monument, however, tucked along Sickles Avenue in the Rose Woods, portrays a different message. The monument of the 116th Pennsylvania, erected by regimental survivors in 1888, is the only monument at Gettysburg that depicts a dead soldier. While other monuments, such as the Freemason monument at the Soldier's National Cemetery, the Louisiana state monument, and the Mississippi state monument depict wounded soldiers, these monuments are accompanied by themes of fraternity and noble sacrifice as the focal point rather than the fallen soldier himself.



These two examples of Confederate monuments at Gettysburg feature wounded soldiers, but in each there is a focal point of another theme. In the Louisiana monument, the wounded soldier clutches his heart while Spirit Triumphant flies overhead. The Mississippi monument depicts a comrade standing over his fallen brother wielding his rifle as a club against oncoming attackers. *Images courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*

Recruited from the Irish-American population of Philadelphia, the 116th was a member of the famed Irish Brigade. At the Battle of Chancellorsville, the 116th performed well by rescuing a Maine battery from capture. For this action, the 116th's commander, Major St. Clair A. Mulholland, received the Medal of Honor. By the battle of Gettysburg, the 116th had been reduced to barely four companies. During the morning of the July 2, the 116th moved in to support the right flank of the III Corps and fought in various support capacities throughout the day. At the end of the battle, the 116th had lost two men killed, twelve wounded, and eight missing.



The 116th Pennsylvania monument at Gettysburg is an interesting mix of wreckage mixed with peace. Death is portrayed in a lonely yet sanitized manner. No accompanying text elaborates or explains what message the artist was attempting to portray. *Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.*

Compared to other regiments that fought at Gettysburg, the 116th sustained incredibly low casualties. A fallen soldier may be better suited for the monument of a regiment such as the 1st Minnesota, which lost 224 of 335 men, most of whom fell during a single desperate charge to hold the Union line on the second day. However, the 1st Minnesota monument depicts a young man charging with fixed bayonet. So where does the 116th's fallen soldier come from and what message is it supposed to send? Supposedly, the

soldier is based off a sketch made by Mulholland's adjutant. Walking over the fields after the battle, the adjutant came across the body of Sergeant Charles Garner of the 110th PA infantry and was so taken by the peaceful smile on his face that he immediately sketched the figure. The 116th PA monument, however, offers little interpretation. There is no quote accompanying the fallen soldier, no flag draped around or under him to indicate sacrifice for nation, nor any individual personal effects. The body merely lies behind a broken stone wall. Seemingly abandoned in the wreckage of war, the soldier's peaceful smile contrasts this and leaves the viewer confused. The sculpture itself serves as the lid to a sepulcher upon which is carved the II Corps Badge and a bronze panel with the names of soldiers from the regiment who fought at Gettysburg. The purposeful ambiguity of the monument leaves considerable freedom for interpretation. Undoubtedly, many of this blog's readers have seen this monument. I leave the question to you, dear readers: please leave a comment below outlining what the monument communicates to you.

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