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For Duty, Honor, and Family: Color Bearers in the Civil War

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Abstract

In doing research for a previous post, I learned about the stand of the Sixteenth Maine at the Battle of Gettysburg. What struck me most about their sacrifice was the fact that before they were captured they made sure to tear up their colors and distribute the pieces among the men. They did this in order to ensure that the Confederates wouldn't be able to capture their colors, an act that would have disgraced the Sixteenth Maine and detracted from their valiant sacrifice. In addition, this allowed the men to keep a piece of their flag, to be reminded of their sacrifice and courage while they sat in a Confederate prison. Stories about regimental flags such as this one abound, which begs the question of why colors and color bearers were so important that men put themselves in immense danger to protect them.

[excerpt]

Keywords

Civil War, Gettysburg College, flag

Disciplines

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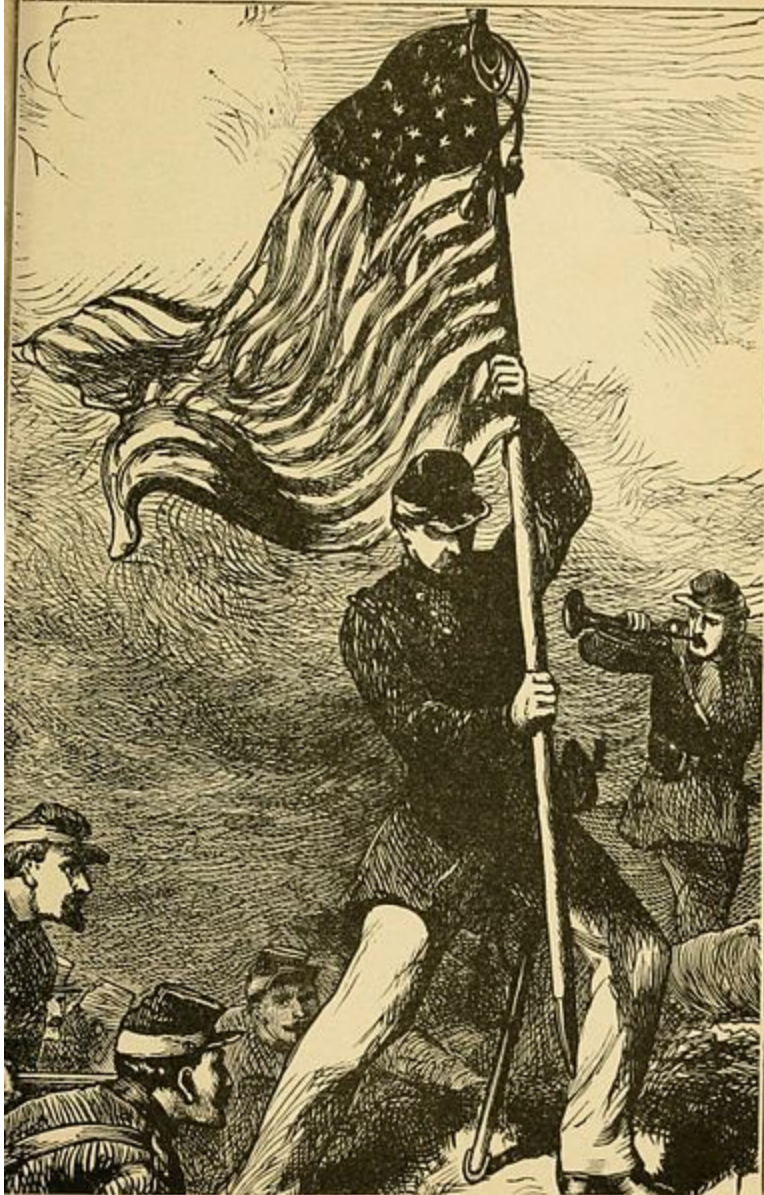
THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

For Duty, Honor, and Family: Color Bearers in the Civil War

By Savannah Labbe '17

In doing research for a previous post, I learned about the stand of the Sixteenth Maine at the Battle of Gettysburg. What struck me most about their sacrifice was the fact that before they were captured they made sure to tear up their colors and distribute the pieces among the men. They did this in order to ensure that the Confederates wouldn't be able to capture their colors, an act that would have disgraced the Sixteenth Maine and detracted from their valiant sacrifice. In addition, this allowed the men to keep a piece of their flag, to be reminded of their sacrifice and courage while they sat in a Confederate prison. Stories about regimental flags such as this one abound, which begs the question of why colors and color bearers were so important that men put themselves in immense danger to protect them.



A Union color bearer with his flag. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

Civil War color bearers played a practical role as well as a highly symbolic one. The colors helped soldiers see where their units were located in the confusing, smoke-filled battlefield. Color bearers also set the pace for the march, making sure it was the proper length and cadence. Flags were the centerpieces of the battle, often resulting in high casualty rates of color bearers and their guards. In addition, color bearers didn't carry weapons, increasing their likeliness of being killed or wounded. If a color bearer happened to be shot down, a member of his guard would immediately pick up the colors in order to avoid the disgrace of losing one.

Flags were often made by women from the areas where units were initially raised. For example, the women of Jacksonport, Arkansas sent their "Jackson Guards" off to war with a flag that they

made. Thus, the flag became intimately connected with the men's home and gave them a reason to fight: protection. The Civil War was very much a war of regional alliance. It was a fight to preserve one's home and way of life. The colors embodied this and served as a symbol of the ideals and values that the men were fighting to uphold such as family, duty, and honor. These ideals and the flag that embodied them served to rally the men and increase their morale, encouraging them to fight on when they otherwise would not have.

Civil War flags were highly symbolic and full of meaning, just as flags are today. The flags helped establish a group identity and gave the men something to fight for, which explains why there are so many stories of drastic measures taken by soldiers to prevent their colors from being captured. Flags were also intertwined with ideas of victory and the capture of enemy territory. They could be used to mark territory as one's own.

The use of a flag for this purpose is seen in the memoir of a private named George Sharland, in which there is a description of the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain. This battle took place on June 27, 1864 and was part of Sherman's campaign to capture an important Confederate city: Atlanta. Sherman planned a series of flanking maneuvers in order to push the Confederates slowly back to new defensive positions, and Kennesaw Mountain was one such maneuver. Sherman attacked the Confederates, who were deeply entrenched and occupied a heavily defended position. The Union army came under heavy fire as a result, suffered heavy losses, and were forced to fall back. For the next few days heavy skirmishing occurred, eventually resulting in Confederate withdrawal. After the Confederate evacuation, the Union army became "victors of the spot," and, as Sharland recalls, his regiment was the "first to plant the stars and stripes on its lofty summit, and unfold the banner to the breeze, and ere the sun reflected in the horizon, its graceful folds could be seen floating proudly on the mountain top, from which the stars and bars had previously been ejected." This highly symbolic gesture, the replacement of the enemy flag with their own, was the ultimate declaration of victory. It claimed the spot and symbolized the victory of all the ideals and values that their flag stood for. It was confirmation that what they were fighting for was good and just and more worthy than that of the enemy. Thus, the colors and color bearer were important as carriers of this symbol and the values and ideals it represented.

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