



5-11-2018

A Slaughter Forgotten: A Reflection on the Wayside on Iverson's Assault

Zachary A. Wesley
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler>

 Part of the [Military History Commons](#), [Public History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Wesley, Zachary A., "A Slaughter Forgotten: A Reflection on the Wayside on Iverson's Assault" (2018). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 311.

<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/311>

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/311>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

A Slaughter Forgotten: A Reflection on the Wayside on Iverson's Assault

Abstract

Nearly every visitor to Gettysburg can easily point to Pickett's Charge as the bloodiest loss the Confederates suffered on the field during the three days of fighting here. However, few know that another Confederate assault during the battle rivaled the horrendous casualty rates of July 3. On the afternoon of July 1, Brigadier General Alfred Iverson ordered his North Carolina brigade forward against the Federal positions on Oak Ridge, essentially sending them to their slaughter. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CWI Experiences, Alfred Iverson, Oak Ridge, Wayside

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

Comments

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

[A Slaughter Forgotten: A Reflection on the Wayside on Iverson's Assault](#)

By [Zachary Wesley '20](#)

Nearly every visitor to Gettysburg can easily point to Pickett's Charge as the bloodiest loss the Confederates suffered on the field during the three days of fighting here. However, few know that another Confederate assault during the battle rivaled the horrendous casualty rates of July 3. On the afternoon of July 1, Brigadier General Alfred Iverson ordered his North Carolina brigade forward against the Federal positions on Oak Ridge, essentially sending them to their slaughter.

I have had the distinct pleasure to work on a wayside detailing this assault over the course of this semester. When I received my project assignment, I knew of Iverson's assault only in passing. Much of what I did know came in the context of the Federal soldiers who moved into position along Oak Ridge after the assault disintegrated. I quickly realized that what this attack lacked in terms of size (it was staged by only one brigade) it more than made up for regarding the sheer incompetence of its "commander" and the resulting slaughter.

Alfred Iverson had the necessary pre-requisites to be a fine commander. He was born to the well-known lawmaker Alfred Iverson Sr. in 1829 in Georgia and studied at the Tuskegee Military Institute. At the age of 17, he fought in the Mexican-American War and then served in Kansas during the period known as Bleeding Kansas. At the outbreak of the American Civil, Iverson received command of the Twentieth North Carolina Infantry and led this regiment during the Peninsula Campaign with great distinction. He was promoted after Antietam to command of the brigade he led at Gettysburg. The relationship between Iverson and his men, however, was far from harmonious. In the aftermath of the Battle of Chancellorsville, Iverson and his officers quarreled over the former's attempts to elevate a personal friend to fill his former regimental command. Unsurprisingly, therefore, rumors moved amongst the men that their commander received his command via political influence. This fact only found further evidence based on his conduct during the Battle of Gettysburg.

Iverson's brigade was part of the division of General Robert E. Rodes, which also included the commands of Brigadier Generals Junius Daniels, George Doles, Stephen Ramseur, and Colonel Edward O'Neal. Iverson's men led the column on its advance from the west of Gettysburg, arriving at Oak Hill in the early afternoon. A coordinated assault was planned involving the commands of Iverson, O'Neal, and Daniels, with the

latter to function in a support role. Much to Iverson's amazement, O'Neal's men advanced early due to a breakdown in communications. Henry Baxter's Federals repulsed this unsupported attack with relative ease before shifting their front to plug the gap between themselves and the Federals to their left. At around 2:30 pm, Iverson's men formed into line of battle and stepped-off with parade ground precision. The Federals took position behind a stone wall in their front, keeping weapons and flags below the edge of the fence. The Confederates advanced without skirmishers screening their advance—thus, there was little to no warning of the Federals that lay in their front.



This photograph of Alfred Iverson Jr. shows a man of considerable societal standing, a factor that would come to haunt him during the war. One of the charges that Iverson never lived down was that his various commands during the Civil War came not from his military experience but rather from political maneuvers. Worse, rumors swirled that Iverson's decision to watch the assault from so far in the rear stemmed from drunkenness. Photo credit: GeorgiaInfo, an online Georgia almanac.

When the Tar Heels got within 50 yards, the Federals rose and opened fire, knocking massive holes into the Confederate ranks. The stunned ranks then attempted to return fire before falling back into a gully over which they had previously advanced. Within twenty minutes, white handkerchiefs appeared along the edge of the gully—the Confederates were surrendering. Over 900 of Iverson's 1,384 men had been killed, wounded, or captured. Meanwhile, Alfred Iverson remained comfortably in the rear, enraged at the supposed cowardice of his men. In recalling the disastrous assault, Iverson recalled "I saw white handkerchiefs raised, and my line of battle still lying down in position, I characterized the surrender as disgraceful; but when I found afterward

that 500 of my men were left lying dead and wounded on a line as straight as a dress parade, I exonerated ... the survivors.”

The aftermath was a horrific scene. The dead remained in neat, packed rows. Their boots remained in a straight line, as if they were standing in formation—the blood flowed like streams, staining the ground a crimson hue until the rains following the battle. Iverson’s sheer incompetence and disregard for his men was on full display in his conduct on July 1, 1863. The unwritten code of Southern honor held that the gentleman officer should lead his men by example; the soldiers were to courageously face their enemy and willingly sacrifice their lives for their country. Although many of the men in the assault ultimately surrendered, they fought until the situation became too desperate to warrant further resistance. Their commander, however, comfortably watched the slaughter unfold from the rear, divorced from the reality of the firestorm his men confronted. Unsurprisingly, his men never forgave him for his actions, essentially refusing to acknowledge him as their commander. Iverson was relieved of command on July 19 before being transferred to Georgia, much to the disgust of his former soldiers. They had hoped that he would be removed from any command in the Confederate army.

The casualties sustained by Iverson’s command are matched in scale by only one other brigade to take the field at Gettysburg: Richard Garnett’s Virginians. In considering this idea, it seemed strange to me that the latter is celebrated as a high-point of Southern heroism while the former is largely forgotten. Surely, some of this emerged from the early Lost Cause emphasis on Virginia and her soldiers. Iverson’s men being North Carolinians, their sacrifices were largely glossed over. Of course, the scale of Pickett’s Charge also dwarfs the maneuvers against the Union soldiers on Oak Ridge. Nevertheless, the sheer slaughter seems a more likely candidate. Just as my work last semester on the Virginia Memorial Wayside, historical memory played a key role in my perspective. In some respects, therefore, the surviving Tar Heels got their wish. The double-edged sword of memory largely placed Iverson on the periphery of Civil War history, though it also erased the brutality of the assault his men undertook on July 1. To most of us, therefore, Iverson’s assault truly is a slaughter forgotten.