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Iverson's Assault: A Cautionary Tale

Abigail Cocco
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

In the fall, I had the incredible opportunity to work on developing a wayside for the 20th Maine at Little Round Top. Working on that wayside was really meaningful to me because it was an opportunity to tell the kind of story that has the potential to inspire in visitors a sense of national pride and appreciation for our past. Though my colleague and I tried to make clear that the fighting at Little Round Top was a bloody and savage fight, the story remains a heroic tale of brave men, exceptional leadership, and sacrifice for a higher purpose. This semester, when working a wayside for Brigadier General Alfred Iverson's July 1st assault, my colleague, Zach Wesley, and I dealt with an entirely different story. We were tasked with telling a narrative not of heroism and higher purpose, but about dereliction of duty and senseless death. This story is important to tell because it is a reminder of the harsh realities that accompany war in any age. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Iverson's Assault: A Cautionary Tale

By [Abigail Coco '19](#)

In the fall, I had the incredible opportunity to work on developing a wayside for the 20th Maine at Little Round Top. Working on that wayside was really meaningful to me because it was an opportunity to tell the kind of story that has the potential to inspire in visitors a sense of national pride and appreciation for our past. Though my colleague and I tried to make clear that the fighting at Little Round Top was a bloody and savage fight, the story remains a heroic tale of brave men, exceptional leadership, and sacrifice for a higher purpose. This semester, when working a wayside for Brigadier General Alfred Iverson's July 1st assault, my colleague, Zach Wesley, and I dealt with an entirely different story. We were tasked with telling a narrative not of heroism and higher purpose, but about dereliction of duty and senseless death. This story is important to tell because it is a reminder of the harsh realities that accompany war in any age.

As it stands, the park avoids much interpretation Iverson's assault. Instead, the Eternal Peace Light Memorial dominates the landscape. The Eternal Peace Light Memorial, dedicated in 1938, served to unite the North and South on the eve of World War II. The memorial is an important part of the way we remember and make sense of the Civil War, but it also obscures the savagery that took place on the battlefield on July 1st, 1863. On that day, Iverson's men launched a poorly-timed assault, unaware that the Union soldiers stood crouched behind a stone wall in front of them. From a distance of fifty yards, the Union soldiers emerged from behind the wall and gunned down 900 of Iverson's 1400 men in a span of only 20 minutes. It's nearly impossible to imagine the carnage that took place on Oak Ridge that day, but we hoped to highlight the brutality of the assault through evocative imagery and eyewitness accounts. One quote that really stuck out to me was written by Confederate artilleryman Henry Berkeley. He wrote, "*There were ... seventy-nine North Carolinians laying dead in a straight line... They had evidently been killed by one volley of musketry and they had fallen in their tracks without a single struggle.*" I think these words are incredibly powerful because they provide a visual that has the potential to leave a visitor feeling strong emotions, and perhaps somewhat unsettled.

While Iverson's men were being gunned down by Union soldiers from close proximity, Iverson himself remained in the rear. Perhaps it was cowardice that kept him back, or perhaps he was drunk as the rumors suggested. Whatever the reason for Iverson's failure to lead that day, his actions highlight unfortunate reality of war. Though military leaders are typically held to a higher standard than enlisted men, they too exhibit the whole range of human experience. They display bravery and cowardice; they make good calls and they misjudge situations; they coordinate effectively and they fail to communicate. In Iverson's case, his failure to communicate with another brigade commander left his men vulnerable to the Union ambush. He was not the first military commander to fail, and he certainly would not be the last. However,

Iverson's assault reveals the devastating consequences that inevitable lapses of judgement among leadership can have. In war, the consequence of mistakes, miscommunication, or cowardice is too often bloodbath.

Perhaps worst of all, the story of Iverson's assault appears to have no redemptive quality for Iverson's men. They did their duty, but for what? While the Union soldiers at Little Round Top bravely sacrificed themselves for the preservation of the Union and for the freedom of millions, over half of Iverson's men were massacred in a span of twenty minutes to preserve the right of some to own others. For Iverson's men, the Confederate cause was a worthy one; they fought to hold onto the foundation of their society. Yet, the carelessness and negligence with which Iverson's attack was carried out meant that they did not die a noble death. Rather, they were simply gunned down in their tracks. Not only did many of them die unnecessary deaths, they died for a losing cause and for one that history ultimately deemed ignoble. For me, the story of Iverson's assault serves as a cautionary tale for future generations. In many cases, war isn't about glory and sacrifice. Instead, it's about following orders that sometimes get a lot of people killed. Sometimes war serves to make the world a better place, but sometimes history judges its cause unjust. Whatever the case, the disaster that occurred at Iverson's Pits should serve as a reminder of the devastating impact of war.



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