July 3, 2013 Reflection: A Chance Encounter

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Abstract
In a July 4 letter to his father-in-law, General Alexander Hays expressed reserve. “Yesterday was a warm one for us,” he wrote. “The fight of my division was a perfect success […] We are all sanguine of ridding our soil of the invaders.”

The “perfect success” for Hays was his command’s role in the repulse of Pettigrew’s division in what has become known as Pickett’s Charge. It was an unquestionable victory for his division and the Army of the Potomac. Yet Alex Hays’s matter-of-fact letter was not buoyant with the egoism so easily ascribed to generals after their victories. Hays does not mention, in any detail, his actions of July 3, where he remained in the saddle under artillery fire, inspiring his troops with his personal bravery so that his example would assuage their own fears of the looming Confederate assault. Nor does he detail the fight itself – the laying down of a wall of brutal fire by his men against their attackers – the melting away of enemy brigades to his front, the rebels falling dead and wounded as his men cheered for their destruction. Perhaps the greatest moment of Alex Hays’s life, certainly the pinnacle of his career as a soldier, his famed dragging of a Confederate battle standard in the dirt in front of his cheering men (and also in front of dying enemy soldiers) is also unmentioned, though, to do so in a after-action letter to his father-in-law would have been viewed, perhaps, as gauche. [excerpt]

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Ian Isherwood ’00

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The “perfect success” for Hays was his command’s role in the repulse of Pettigrew’s division in what has become known as Pickett’s Charge. It was an unquestionable victory for his division and the Army of the Potomac. Yet Alex Hays’s matter-of-fact letter was not buoyant with the egoism so easily ascribed to generals after their victories. Hays does not mention, in any detail, his actions of July 3, where he remained in the saddle under artillery fire, inspiring his troops with his personal bravery so that his example would assuage their own fears of the looming Confederate assault. Nor does he detail the fight itself – the laying down of a wall of brutal fire by his men against their attackers – the melting away of enemy brigades to his front, the rebels falling dead and wounded as his men cheered for their destruction. Perhaps the greatest moment of Alex Hays’s life, certainly the pinnacle of his career as a soldier, his famed dragging of a Confederate battle standard in the dirt in front of his cheering men (and also in front of dying enemy soldiers) is also unmentioned, though, to do so in a after-action letter to his father-in-law would have been viewed, perhaps, as gauche.
Instead, what we assume was an exhausted Hays wrote only a brief note to soothe the anxiety of his family, a note in which he lamented the loss of his beloved horse Dan (and the wounding of another horse named Leet). To convey his feelings Hays picked a word that is unfamiliar to twentieth century ears and eyes – sanguine – a word of emotional complexity, one vivid and appropriate for the aftermath of battle. Hays and his men were confident in their victory, enthused by the very sanguineous – what we would call the downright horrific bloodletting – of July 3. In two days at Gettysburg Hays’s division lost 1,285 men killed, wounded, and missing. On July 4, before Alex Hays’s eyes, were fields dotted with corpses. The bloodstained remnants of fallen men, quite literally large stains upon the earth where men had fallen wounded, were all-around, and the wounded themselves were being carried past his soldiers on litters to hospitals where the ghastly work of healing was underway. For the men of his division, the survivors of the battle, they were surrounded by the material horror of a battle well-fought; on July 4 their eyes and ears were still stinging with the memories of the day before, their lips were likely still stained with powder. No doubt Hays’s own uniform still bore the smell of battle, and perhaps, even the dried blood of his dead horse.
150 years after these events, I stood where Hays was at the time of the battle, taking snapshots of the advancing brigades of commemorators as they crossed the open field to my front. I am a Pittsburgher by birth and spent my childhood as a Civil War buff enthralled with stories of brave Alex Hays and his trusted aide, David Shields, the latter whom was from my hometown of Sewickley. So it seemed fitting to be where Hays and Shields were to watch the commemoration. It was a moving sight to see so many people literally inundating themselves with history so that they could attempt to touch the ethereal past in a unique way by walking its memory in real time. For many who were there on July 3, 2013, there was a pseudo-spiritual moment of connection with something having to do with the past – I’m being intentionally vague here because the motivations of commemoration are multifarious and varied memories should never be reduced to the fallacy of collectivization no matter how easy the temptation to do so (or in real-people-speak – we all think different things about the past and memory is complicated). My reasons for being there – my life-long love of history, my childhood steeped in Civil War nerdery, my academic interests in military history and tactics, my implicit feelings of not wanting to be left out of a historical event, my job at Gettysburg College, and because a real time Pickett’s Charge recreation seemed like it would be pretty rad way to spend an afternoon – were different than those who came to honor their ancestors or to relive (possibly even refight) the past. If the social history maxim of “we all got history” is true, then we all got reasons why we like history too.
I watched the commemoration through the lens of my camera. But then an odd thing happened as the brigades to my front began to dissipate after taps had been mournfully played. The crowds began to merge together (or reconcile?) into one Yankee and Rebel mass and people began to make their way to Steinwehr Avenue where the temptations of a cold drink, ice cream, or “battlefield” fries awaited. I held my position in the center of Hays’s line. I was thinking about the recreated assault and trying to get my head around what I just witnessed. Then for some reason I looked over my left shoulder and saw, sauntering up towards me, a friend of mine from my childhood in Sewickley. He was visiting with one of his friends, the two gents duded-up in nineteenth century civilian gear, resplendent with brocade waistcoats and top hats, walking through the cargo-shorted masses with the confidence of carnival barkers. My friend saw me and I him. I walked over and after a jocular greeting said, “You know this is right where he rode, dragging the flag, 150 years ago.” My friend nodded and smiled broadly before saying, “Pretty amazing, right?”

What was amazing was not that two childhood friends met at a Civil War commemorative event, but that my friend is a descendent of General Hays, and I, by
chance, ran into him on the exact spot where his ancestor fought 150 years before. Later we went out for one of those cold drinks in town and recalled his ancestor’s war record (and a few stories from our own shared history together in Sewickley too). The next day we went to Hays’s statue together to pay our respects to the great Pittsburgher exactly 150 years after he sanguinely wrote his father-in-law of the “perfect success” of the Confederate defeat. The past’s power, of course, lies in commemoration of significant events on original ground, but also in history’s transcendent serendipity, its occasional ironies, and the complexities of historical memory recalled and relived in the present.